



# LOST WAGES OF SIN

SINNERS AND SAINTS: BOOK ONE

ROSALIE STANTON

# **Lost Wages of Sin**

Sinners and Saints

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## **Blurb**

*Sin's work is never done...*

Ava should know. For nearly two thousand years, she's worked for Lucifer himself, infecting the heart of man with greed wherever she goes. She wasn't prepared to fall in love, certainly not with an angel. And she definitely wasn't ready to experience her first broken heart after he breaks things off in the form of a Dear Jane letter.

Now Ava has a problem. Lucifer believes she might have shared some of Hell's secrets with her former lover, and her siblings face the possibility of being out of a job due to her indiscretion. Ava flees to the American South, hoping to slip off the radar, and is met by a longtime friend, a vampire named Dante. Granted, Ava doesn't know he has been in love with her for centuries, and doesn't understand why he won't leave her alone no matter what comes after her.

With Hell on her trail, Ava's running short on friends. Meanwhile, she can't ignore the suggestive looks Dante keeps sending her way. Something tells her it doesn't take Hell to get things hot...

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## **Dedication**

For Aaron

## Chapter One

While far from perfect, life as of last week had at least been normal. If things had stayed the course, Avaritia might well be sipping on a bloody gin and tonic, swaying on her porch swing rather than on the run from those she once called friends. Yet instead, here she stood, a dimension away from home and deep in the Bible Belt.

“At least no one will think to look for you here,” she muttered, kicking a headstone. Ava had never understood the appeal of talking to oneself until that moment. It seemed an exercise in futility.

Natchez sat on a bluff overlooking the Mississippi River and a bridge away from Louisiana. While Ava’s vocation occasionally directed her to Mississippi, namely to dangle something tantalizing in the face of a politician, she wasn’t the sort to stick around unless there were bonus points in the air. New Orleans was more her scene when traveling south of the Mason Dixon, but Natchez, with its sleepy town politics and veneer of southern tranquility, seemed the perfect hideaway until someone resolved this mess with the Seven.

Things had been so different last week. Funny how one itty-bitty run-in with an angel had all of Hell ablaze. She could kill herself for her stupidity.

And yet, she’d wanted it all. It was in her nature. Greed had always been her vice. She was damn good at her job.

Ava sighed and slid her hands in her pockets. She’d decided to troll the local cemetery in hopes of finding something to kill, because honestly, this under-the-radar stuff sucked. There seemed little harm in taking advantage of local ignorance and tossing a few demons back to Hell. It would give her something to do at the very least.

And it would also go a long way in keeping her mind off Sebastian.

Damn, she’d done so well too. Almost thirty whole seconds without thinking of her angel. The sick feeling returned. Nearly two thousand fucking years and not once had her chest ached like this. In her world, pain was easy to identify. If she hurt, someone had likely socked her. If she groaned, she was typically doubled over. Hurting without reason didn’t make sense, and yet she hurt like nothing else.

Ava hissed and fell slack against a gravestone. She hadn’t thought it possible. Sebastian had changed everything—opened doors she hadn’t even noticed, and just as quickly closed them again.

A few days of passion and she’d been ready to walk away from everything. The job for which she’d been created, the only friends she’d ever known, and the only place she’d called home. All for Sebastian. It had been new for him as well, he’d said. New, crazy and wonderful. Centuries of wandering through the world, guarding lost souls or reaping chaos over the hearts of man, and neither of them had ever fallen in love. Those few days had been the best of her existence. For once she felt more than what she was. She’d seen a life outside of the world she’d known, and god, she’d wanted it more than anything.

It all ended once Sebastian had realized the price that came with loving her. A closed door to Paradise, the loss of his wings and a status as One of the Fallen. It didn’t concern him that Ava had already typed and handed Lucifer her two weeks’ notice, never considering her angel would renege on his promise. Angels couldn’t lie, could they?

Beings of compassion, love and patience could outlast anything—even expulsion from Heaven.

It wouldn't cost her nearly as much as it'd cost him.

*Traitor.*

She shivered. Ava had been prepared to take the demotion, turn in her pitchfork and live out the rest of eternity with her de-winged angel. Life as a demon didn't seem unreasonable for the happiness that came with it, and she had never known happiness.

It hadn't been enough for Sebastian. Once he realized what loving her would cost him, he'd high-tailed it skyward and groveled like a weenie at Big J's feet. And knowing or not, intentional or not, he'd essentially signed Ava's death warrant.

A de-winged angel couldn't return to Paradise, therefore any information he might have gleaned from the other side would never make it to the ears of anyone who had a hand in public affairs. And Lucifer, while not happy to lose Ava, had all but given her his curse—a high honor in the pit—for corrupting an angel and convincing him to fall.

That honor had been stripped. Sebastian's return painted her a double agent, effectively killing any chance of going home.

So here she sat, a former spy and advisor to the Prince of Lies, moping in the heart of a southern tourist trap.

"Come on," she muttered. "Just give me one demon. Just one little demon."

A noise directed her gaze upward.

It appeared someone out there listened. While there were indeed many demons that instilled cold, piercing fear into the hearts of men, most were bumbling idiots. Likewise, and contrary to popular human belief, they were not evil beings. They received a bad reputation from classic novels, biblical misinterpretations and feature films, but in most cases were completely neutral on the cosmic scale. True, many demons used their non-human status as an excuse to reap as much damage as possible, but those that had any wits about them kept to themselves.

Unfortunately, that sort was few and far between. Most every demon Ava had encountered believed they were inherently evil due to their own lack of education, and when they set their sights on her they tended to cause trouble. With her dark auburn hair, nonthreatening demeanor and penchant for hanging out where most single white females wouldn't be caught dead alone, she all but antagonized them into a fight.

The three goons strolling drunkenly down Cemetery Road were no different. The second they set their sights on her, her wish was granted. "Well, well, boys," said the first demon, a lecherous grin stretching across his deformed lips. "What've we got here?"

Had there ever been a time when that line was fresh?

The second demon cast her a look that she, quite frankly, didn't want to analyze. "Wanna dance, little girl?"

Her lips twitched. She'd complain to others, but in truth, she loved this part. The bigger they were and all that. Ava looked human, smelled human and sounded human. Only a handful of earthbound demons knew otherwise. Even those demons didn't know as much as they thought they did. Lucifer didn't want word getting out he had her kind in his arsenal.

Her mind drifted to Dante who was the only vampire Ava really liked, and the only demon to whom she'd personally selected to reveal her superbeing status. All others were acquaintances of convenience. The thought was unprovoked and without aim, but she

found herself calming at even the idea of a friendly face. He was sin incarnate, which made him the worst sort of temptation—the sort with which she most often flirted. She'd considered inviting him into her bed on more than one occasion, but ultimately, it seemed like a surefire way to wind up with a broken heart. And since Sebastian had already dealt that particular blow, Ava didn't feel like opening herself up again. She wasn't like her sister, Luxi, who hopped from man to man, and while her vocation allowed for a certain amount of freedom, she likewise didn't specialize in detached sex.

Another misconception about her kind—or really, *any* kind from the pit. It had taken a lot to fall as far as she had, and she'd only allowed her defenses to fall so easy, because she assumed angels had honor. If she'd known ... if she'd just...

Dante would certainly go a long way in washing her skin free of Sebastian's touch, but the boy was too wild to tame. Call Ava old-fashioned, but she wanted the real thing. And for that want, she'd thrown everything away.

Another unfortunate side-effect of Sebastian's abrupt departure was this sudden tendency to space off when she shouldn't. Ava found herself smacked to the ground in a flash, the demon pissants looming over her with eagerness she desperately needed to eradicate.

"Think we caught a slow one, boys," one of the demons cackled. "Tonight's not gonna be wasted after all."

Ava rolled her eyes and leapt back to her feet. "Sorry," she said shortly, wheeling a power kick into the demon's gut. "Won't happen again."

Ava loved fighting. She loved the thrill of the moment, loved the smack of flesh against her knuckles, loved the wind in her hair, and even the sting of the inevitable blows she took in return. True, if she wanted to end this quickly it wouldn't take much more than a blink, but there was no fun in that. She needed this—she needed the rush. She needed to feel the ache in her jaw and the pain in her gut. She needed this to feel alive.

"Guess this is a show of same scene, different graveyard, eh, Ava?"

What she didn't need was the voice of the vampire she'd just been thinking about to penetrate the air and throw her completely off her game. And more importantly, off her feet. Ava whirled around, baffled, and opened herself up to a harsh punch from Demon One.

"Ouch," Dante said, flinching. "That looked painful."

Ava hurled herself to her feet. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Reckon I oughta ask you the same thing," Dante replied from where he sat rather comfortably on a nearby mausoleum. "Course that might be a tad redundant. You're very obviously getting your scrumptious little rear kicked."

"You're in Mississippi?" She groaned, ducking the fist of Demon One and aiming a kick at Demon Two. "Am I dreaming?"

"Dunno. Dream of me often?"

She snickered. "Okay then. I guess this has to be a nightmare."

"For me too. Hate Mississippi."

"Then why are you here?"

He shrugged. "Word had it it's where you were, which, not gonna lie, shocked the hell outta me. New York seems more your style."

The mere mention had Ava sighing wistfully. "If only."

Dante grinned. "Anything new?"

Ava shrugged the best she could, grasping the arm of Demon Three and using its weight to leverage another well-aimed kick at Demon Two. "Oh, you know," she replied, punches punctuating her words. "Same old. Same old."

He chuckled appreciatively. "Just can't help making friends wherever you go. Who are these clowns?"

"Just some guys I met in a bar." Her head flipped up under the swinging arm, securing a glare in the vampire's direction. He truly was too gorgeous for words, which spoke for most of the undead. There were many aspects of vamplore that Anne Rice and Stephanie Meyer had completely fucked up, but ethereal beauty was not one of them. It was a survival thing—part of Darwin's theories put to the test in ways he never imagined. Not all vamps came with super strength or the inclination to hunt, but where their strength betrayed them, their looks did not.

Dante had always seemed a bit too perfect when it came to the male form, but then again, Ava knew half a million demons who would disagree with her. She supposed it was a matter of personal taste. Her sister had an insatiable appetite for ... well, men, women and what-have-you, but Luxi was most prone to men built like football players. Ava was just the opposite. Her poison was a man who wouldn't tower over her and likewise not make her feel too butch at the same time. Dante fit the bill. He was only a few inches taller than she and had a body built for debauchery, complete with strong arms and a marble-carved chest. Tonight, he was wrapped in a snug pair of jeans and a form-fitting navy tee, which made his pale skin seem paler. His hair was coal-black and his eyes sparkled blue. Ava had always loved his eyes.

Not that she'd ever tell him any of that.

"Look," she said at last, biting her thoughts back with a healthy helping of anger. Dante might be a friend—a fucking gorgeous friend at that—but she wasn't in the mood to trade barbs or entertain his cocky ass. Not at the moment, at least. "Are you just gonna small-talk me to death or did you just want a good seat?"

Demon One stopped and held up his cloven hands. "Hey, are we keeping you from something? 'Cause we could totally reschedule the ... you know, killing you."

"Whoa! Do you two, like, know each other?" Demon Two asked, blinking dumbly.

Dante snickered and ignored them. "You sure do attract the thick ones."

"You're one to talk," Ava spat.

"Look, vamp," Demon One said in defeat. "You gonna help or not? We *are* kinda busy here."

"Right," Dante replied. "Three on one and not a single one of you has managed to slow her down." He snickered. "Wannabes."

It was very obviously the wrong time to crack a grin, but for whatever reason, she couldn't help herself.

"Vamps are so fucking useless," Demon One snarled.

Demon Three, the only one in the group not versed in English, gurgled something sounding like an agreement.

Ava glanced at Dante. "Hear that? You're useless."

"Figures. Mom always told me I wouldn't amount to anything." Dante sighed heavily and hopped off the mausoleum. "Want a hand?"

She shook her head, landing a hard punch against Demon Two's puss-oozing nose

before elbowing Demon Three. "I got it."

"You're sure?"

"Positive."

Dante huffed. "Right. Every party needs a pooper."

"That's why you invited me."

"You play with them too much," he complained, stepping forward. "Let me show you how it's done."

Then he was everywhere. A blur of motion against a dark silhouette, moving with superhuman speed. Demon One collapsed before she could blink, gurgling and holding his sliced throat, a glassy look of surprise forever trapped on his face. Next went Demon Three, howling in his native tongue as his guts toppled out his split torso.

A hot flash of anger raced down Ava's spine. This was so like him. Show up, distract her and ruin the one solace the night had given her. Glad as she might be to see a familiar face, her frustration needed a channel, and he'd just stolen the only one in sight. "Dante!"

He tossed her a cocky grin. "Snooze you lose, darling," Dante said, seizing Demon Two by the head and giving it a good snap. It crumbled to his feet without a fight.

"Son of a bitch."

He rocked proudly on his heels. "You're welcome."

"What the hell, Dante?"

"Looks to me like I just saved your life."

Ava gestured furiously. "Saved my life?"

"Glad we agree."

"Those were *my* demons."

He shrugged. "Weren't killing them fast enough."

"That was on purpose."

"Likely story. You can admit it now. It's just us."

"Admit it?"

"Yeah. That they were too much for you to handle."

Ava snorted, flexing her fist. Times like this it was difficult to keep from showing the overconfident pest just how much power she wielded ... but then again, she was in enough trouble already without running the risk of exposure. "I'll give you something to handle."

"That a promise?"

"You don't wanna find out."

"You're a spoilsport." Dante shook his head. "I just helped your ungrateful ass, putting myself..." he paused and slapped a hand across his heart, his eyes wide with false sincerity, "at great personal risk."

"Too bad they didn't wipe the floor with you. Your ego's due for a downgrade."

He scowled. "Is it too much to hope for a thank you?"

"I didn't ask you to do anything!"

"Fair enough. I suppose next time I'll just let them have their way with you."

There was no end in sight, and Ava had neither the patience nor the inclination to talk herself in circles. Thus, rather than taking a further dive down a verbal labyrinth, she grounded herself with a long sigh. The pressure on her chest didn't alleviate, but it would with time. Ending an argument without bloodshed was something knowing Dante had forced her to learn. Perhaps she liked him so much because they fought so well. "Okay,"



she conceded. "Okay. What are you doing here?"

"What?"

"I don't want to fight."

"Since when?"

"Since now. What are you doing here?"

"It's my concern," he replied indignantly. "What are *you* doing here?"

"I'm on the lam."

Dante nodded tightly. "That's what I heard. What'd you do this time?"

*Fell in love with an angel. Got the holy treatment.* Ava's face flamed, her skin growing itchy. It'd be a cold day in hell before she gave Dante that bit of blackmail fodder—and she happened to know the last cold day had occurred in 1908 when the Cubs won the world series. "None of your business."

He grinned mischievously. "Nothing to do with a certain angel?"

A long, tired groan rumbled through her throat, her head swinging downward.

"Fuck," she muttered. "How'd you hear?"

"Demon falling for a celestial one? Not much chance of keeping that in."

"Of course not."

"There's a story there." Dante took an eager step forward. "Come on. Talk to Daddy."

"Not a chance."

He bounced impatiently. "What do you have to lose?"

"Except my dignity?"

"You're in Mississippi, and word on the wire is there's a hefty price on your head. Plus, the last man you had between your legs couldn't find a clit if the salvation of mankind depended on it."

"Fair point." She sighed and ran a hand through her hair. "Wanna grab a beer?"

"Thought you'd never ask."

## Chapter Two

The cigarette smoke fogging the bar was part of the permanent décor as was the pulsing music and constant stream of chatter. It had character Dante could appreciate, though his already vivid imagination had them somewhere else—somewhere dark and secluded. Somewhere he could finally own up to centuries of pussyfooting. As it was, his gaze hadn't moved off Ava since she'd licked a drop of beer off her soft, luscious lips.

God, the things the woman did to him.

Dante shook his head. It had been this way as long as he could remember. Ever since she popped into his life—perfect and confident, and without any indication as to who she was, or from where she drew her unusual powers—he'd been on her leash. Like most demons he encountered, he'd thought her human until seeing her in action. She blazed with brilliance when she fought, and he did all he could to get a front row seat for every scuffle.

Yet he'd never seen her like this. Dejected, depressed, her dark amber eyes burdened and heavy. Her pristine skin almost always burned with rouge, but tonight it was pale as the moon. Tendrils of auburn hair framed her face, bringing to light emptiness he would never have associated with a being of such strength and importance. He knew what had happened. Most everyone who knew Ava had been approached after she went missing, and though he'd known it was the truth a large part of him hadn't believed it until tonight.

Ava in love with an angel. Ava in love with anyone who wasn't him.

The possessive beast in his chest roared with anger, but Dante washed it back with a mouthful of beer. It wasn't as though he had any claim on her. He never had, despite the few attempts he'd made over the years to charm her into bed. Ava had simply never shown interest in sex—or any other basic part of the human experience—and since Dante wasn't one to start spouting sonnets, he'd shoved his feelings deep into the recesses of never-going-to-happen and focused on being there for her when he could.

He hadn't lacked female companionship, either. It was one of the nightlife's best perks. He needed to eat, and the women he chose as blood donors were always warm and receptive, and likewise left his bed a satisfied customer. He hadn't bothered developing a lasting relationship—hadn't taken the steps those of his kind took in order to ensure the path to eternity wasn't a lonely one.

The only woman he wanted for keeps was unavailable, and currently sat across the table with a face so haunted he had a good mind to hitch the next ride skyward and give a certain angel a piece of his mind. "How long are we gonna sit here?"

Ava's eyebrow arched. "Thought you wanted a drink."

"Got one."

"Then stop complaining."

Dante licked his lips. "This was your idea, you know."

"None of this was my idea."

"The drinks?"

"No, assface." She gestured emphatically. "This. With you. With anyone. *Here*. At all."

His jaw tightened at that. True enough. She hadn't sought him out at all, and he'd

torn the world apart in search of her. It stung more than it should. After all these years, he'd assumed—foolishly—he was someone to whom she could turn during a moment of need. Besides enjoying each other's company—Dante to the tune of loving her from a distance—they joked and laughed and had a decently normal working relationship. Perhaps they weren't friends, but damn it, they were something.

Why she ran remained a mystery, but the burden weighing her down spoke volumes of what she could not. He had to know about the angel—about the only man who had known Ava's lips and felt her body. He had to know about the man who wasn't him.

Yet he didn't exactly know how to broach the subject. Throwing a wrench into a centuries-long friendship sure as fuck seemed easier on paper. The most he could come up with was, "Wanna spill, precious?"

Ava's attention, which had seemingly wandered off onto some train of thought, snapped back to his. "What?"

"About your celestial honey? The one who rushed back to the Pearly Gates with his wings between his legs?"

She slammed her drink against the table, her mask of the sadness exploding into anger. "Bite me."

"Tempting."

"Yeah. If you have a death wish."

"Baby, I'm a *living* death wish, if you pardon the expression." Dante waggled his eyebrows and blew her a kiss. Not exactly on par with his "show her your softer side" plan, but some habits were hard to break. "Come on. You know you don't wanna go through this all on your lonesome."

"So that leaves you?"

He shrugged. "See anyone else here?"

For a long moment, Ava just stared at him. The wall was up again—the one she routinely always wore around him. He supposed it was fair. His was up around her as well ... else he risked exposing what he didn't want exposed for the sake of pride.

At last, she shook her head and clucked her tongue. "You're a pain in the ass, you know that?"

"Been told a time or two. What've you got to lose? It's not as if I don't already know the ending."

Another beat passed between them before a long sigh shuddered through her, her gaze dropping. "Yeah," she muttered. "Yeah. Everything's pretty much fucked up now, anyway. There's really no way your knowing could make things worse."

"And you can always kick my ass if it does."

"Oh, count on it." Ava motioned for their server, miming a beer order. "It happened fast," she said. "Really fast. I was at the Vatican—"

Dante's jaw went slack. "What?"

"The Vatican. You know, the one that's run by the old guy with the funny hat?"

"I know what the Vatican is, thanks."

"You looked like you didn't."

"I do," he replied tersely. "How the fuck did you manage that?"

"What?"

Dante waved his hand. "The Vatican!"

"I just did."

“You’re a demon.”

Ava’s lips twitched and her pupils sparked. She was always tight-lipped when it came to her origin, and he didn’t know why. Whatever powers she wielded remained under lock and key. Whenever he thought he had her figured out, she’d throw something he never would have considered in the mix. Experience had taught him to never second-guess or underestimate what she had up her sleeve, yet it was a universal law that demons couldn’t enter the realm of the Sacred. Not unless they wanted a first-class ticket back from where they came.

“I’m something, all right,” she replied enigmatically. “Anyway, I was sent after Cardinal Gregori. This guy was the shit. He did all kinds of charity work for children’s hospitals and raised money for AIDs awareness. This was before he made it to Pope City, but still ... I was impressed. Then things went south, as in way.” Ava inhaled sharply and took another sip of her beer. “To make a long story short, after his seventh heart attack and the death of his sister, Hannah, he doubted his faith in Big J.”

For the time being, Dante allowed his curiosity to take a backseat. If he fired off questions now, her wall would fortify and he’d never know what sort of creature could trespass on sacred ground. Instead, he nodded and tossed back a drink. “Take it the sister didn’t die with dignity?”

“Raped. Murdered. Mutilated.”

“How the fuck did that not make the news?”

Ava blinked. “It did, dumbass. It was all *over* the news.”

Dante considered this for a second before shrugging. It was likely true—he wasn’t the kind of guy who checked the news regularly, anyway. “Right. Guess I missed it that night.”

“And all the nights following?”

“What can I say? I’m a popular guy. Places to go, people to see, and all that jazz.”

She shook her head. “Whatever. Anyway, a cardinal on the line, especially one like this, I was sent in.”

Dante considered her carefully. There weren’t powers in this world or any of which he knew that could order demons around unless the command came from Lucifer himself. That couldn’t be right. It couldn’t. “Sent in,” he repeated. “Given an order? Who would...?”

He knew immediately she’d said something she hadn’t intended to say. Her eyes went wide and the smile on her face fell away. Without warning the bricks in the wall flew steadily back into place. Ava shoved her seat back and exhaled deeply. Any hint of their discussion melted just as easily.

“What’s wrong?” Dante demanded.

“I better go.”

“Where?”

“This was—”

“Ava.” Every response was on autopilot, which explained their mutual surprise at his hand’s seemingly independent decision to place itself atop hers. And then, without so much as a hint of warning, the world stopped.

It wasn’t as though he hadn’t touched her before. He had—plenty of times, be it helping her to her feet or deflecting one of the many slaps she delivered to the back side of his head—his skin was no stranger to hers. Yet no touch had ever been so soft or

unprovoked—not once in their centuries-long friendship. Ava just wasn't the sort of woman to seek comfort. Hell, he couldn't remember her once needing reassurance or a shoulder on which to lean. Something about her flesh beneath his palm, his fingertips caressing her wrist, felt sensual and familiar. He knew she felt it too. Her eyes didn't lie.

"Ava," Dante said again, softer this time. "You can talk to me." Her gaze remained glued on their hands. "Ava?"

She blinked rapidly and looked at him. "What?"

"Whatever it is, you can tell me."

"There's nothing—"

"Bullshit. I ask one little question and you freeze on me."

She shrugged. "It's cold in here."

"This is the most humid place in the country. Try again?"

"I can't tell you."

"Why?"

"Because that's just the way things are. I tell you, I get killed."

"Aren't you running that risk, anyway?"

"Yeah, until I get this mess straightened out. I say anymore, and that deal's off. Hell, I've already told you more than anyone needs to know, and I haven't told you anything."

Ava shook her head. "No, I've gotta—"

"You think I'm gonna run and blab to my buddies, is that it? I've always kept your confidences."

"It's not that."

"Then what is it?"

"Seriously, Dante, back off. Don't care about my head? Fine. *You* could get killed if you ever found out—"

"Found out *what*?"

"That I'm a Sin."

\*

*Fuck me.* How had things spiraled out of control so quickly?

Ava sat back, blinking dumbly at the table and half-doubting the reality of anything that had happened since leaving her hotel room. She'd taken refuge somewhere she'd been damn near sure no one would find her, and not only had Dante unearthed her in less than three days, he'd also coaxed from her a confession she'd kept to herself.

God, was it possible Sebastian had fucked up her head more than she'd realized? Luxi had always warned her love would completely destroy her defenses. Furthermore, the concept of saving oneself was something no self-respecting Sin would ever consider. Yet Ava had saved herself. She'd given her virginity to Sebastian, and he'd shat all over it. Now brokenhearted and ostracized from the one home she'd ever known, everything felt surreal.

Perhaps that was why the words had rolled off her lips so freely.

Nearly two thousand years. Two thousand years, and not once had those words come close to escaping her lips. Hell, she'd never even felt tempted, and there had been plenty of times when unleashing her underworld status would have the lesser cretins scouring for the nearest dark corner. All it took it seemed, to betray her roots, was a little homesickness and a hefty price on her head. The rest fell in with ease. Dante's piercing blue eyes and the inexplicable rush that rippled across her skin as his hand settled over

hers. Perhaps Sebastian had lowered her defenses even more than she realized.

Not even he had known what she was. The closest he came was the knowledge she served as one of Lucifer's closest informants. Ava shivered. Two thousand years.

"A sin?" Dante repeated. She glanced up just in time to see his gaze roam down her body, his lips pulling into a hungry smirk. "Tell me something I don't know."

"No. Me. I'm a Sin. One of the Seven." *Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!* Word vomit. She'd never understood the concept until that moment. Ava sighed and collapsed back into her seat just as the waitress set down the beer she'd ordered forever-ago. "I'm dead."

"One of the Seven?"

"Please don't repeat that."

The suggestive glimmer had abandoned Dante's gaze, replaced instead with cold confusion. "One of the—"

"I said, don't repeat it."

"Well, you're one of the six-plus-one? I don't get it."

She huffed. "Forget it."

"Not likely."

"Dante—"

"The Seven De—"

Ava inhaled sharply, practically leaping across the small table and slamming her hand across his mouth. Her skin sizzled with contact, but she managed to ignore it, instead aiming a glare at him. "Don't say it," she snarled. "Not with me here. They'll know."

He tilted his head in question.

"Lucifer, for starters. And the others. Saying what we are is forbidden. Or, more specifically, saying 'The Blank Blanking Blank' is forbidden. The full term. In fact, let's just not say any part of it, at all. Ever." Ava studied him a long beat before convincing herself he wouldn't start screaming her secret at the top of his lungs. Then, carefully, she slid back into her chair with a soft hiss. "If we say what we are, or if anyone we know says what we are, it's like a homing beacon. I didn't work so hard to disappear in Hickville, USA just to have you fuck it up."

Dante considered her for a moment. "All right. So we call it something else. You're one of the—"

"Dwarfs."

"What?"

"Snow White." At his look, she shrugged. "What? They're seven of those."

"They're seven of lots of things."

"Work with me here," Ava said. "I think this actually fits."

Dante didn't look convinced, but he seemed willing to play along. "All right," he said. "So ... which dwarf are you?"

"The one who likes money."

"There isn't a dwarf that likes money."

"I'm sure they didn't mine for pie." She inhaled. "My full name is Avaritia."

His expression told her he understood, even if the full weight of his newfound knowledge hadn't settled in. Ava understood well enough from having had the world turned upside down in her presence that unlearning something one has known for centuries could be more than a little jarring. She didn't want to consider the ramifications

of what she'd confessed, nor did she want to dwell on the fact it felt right to finally get it out. Being one of Lucifer's Seven Deadly Sins had once seemed exciting and dangerous—she had purpose, or so she was told. She and her six siblings were the temptations standing between the mortal souls above and entrance into Big J's Paradise. Their job was more important than any other offered in the pit, and because of that, their identities had remained safely anonymous since inception.

"I don't think I get it."

Ava blinked, shaking her head back to reality. "What? The name?"

"Why this is such a big secret."

"Are you kidding me?"

Dante shrugged. "Well, if it's so cut and dry, explain it me."

"I'm a..." She glanced around, wincing. "*Dwarf*."

"Yeah, got that."

"And ... *dwarfs* are ... well ... we're not exactly supposed to be corporeal."

"You're a concept," he said. "Something no one thought existed in living form. I get that, ducks. What I don't get is why it's so impressive."

"I answer to Lucifer himself. How is that not impressive?"

Dante shrugged. "Not saying it's *not* impressive, just saying I don't see why you're so jumpy. Loads of demons answer to Lucifer."

"I'm not a demon. I'm something else." Ava released a steady breath. "I wasn't created in the pit. Well, I was, but not originally. That's what makes us *dwarfs* so different."

His brow furrowed. "Not following."

"We started as a concept, you're right. But we *weren't* Lucifer's concept." She paused. "We were the church's."

"How's that?"

"Lucifer didn't have a set number of sins cast aside for his special pile. That was the doing of Evagrius Ponticus, a fourth century monk who modernized what was already in the Book of Proverbs." Ava swallowed a gulp of beer and sighed. "Lucifer thought it was a nifty idea, so he created us. Me and my brothers and sisters."

The vampire nodded slowly. "And because of that..."

"Lucifer took a holy man's idea and made it a reality. We were the brainchild of one of Big J's followers. That pretty much gives us free rein, whereas the lower demons are barred by the rules governing the Sacred from the Profane." She shrugged. "That's how I got into the Vatican. In many ways, it's the home I never knew."

At long last it looked as though something had dawned for Dante. His eyebrows drew up and his cynicism slowly drained away, and his expression locked between a place of understanding and denial. Ava almost envied his incredulity. She had never lived in a world where there existed unanswered questions or new feats to discover. Lucifer considered the Sins his children, and though they never enjoyed the rank he pulled, they were treated like the unholy fruit of his loins. She'd never experienced authentic surprise. If something came up, she was in the meeting.

Dante had lived centuries without knowing her kind existed. Certain rules governed his understanding of the universe, and in one night with a few careless words, she'd stupidly pissed all over that.

"Shit," he said at last.

She could do little more than nod. “Yeah.”

“Your kind can go anywhere. And do anything.”

“Tempt anyone,” she agreed. “That’s where I was when I met Sebastian.”

“The Vatican?”

“To tempt a cardinal.”

Dante sat back, dumbfounded. Then he shook his head, his expression clearing.

“Sebastian?” he repeated dryly.

Ava sat back. “What?”

“The angel’s name is Sebastian?”

She wiggled. “Yeah? So?”

“He about four inches tall and have a Jamaican accent?”

Her gaze narrowed. “You think you’re funny.”

“Got plenty of reasons to,” he argued with a self-satisfied grin. Any hint of his former surprise had washed away completely, leaving him looking beautiful, cocky and too damn perfect for words. Either Dante excelled at hiding discomfort, or he really didn’t care much. “So you met lover boy on this mission.”

Ava nodded. “I was there to—”

“Tempt the holy man?”

“Yeah. I was the first in a wave. Invi was scheduled to come in next, if greed wasn’t enough.”

“Invi?”

Ava inclined her head. “My sister. One of my sisters, I should say.”

“And you’re the only…” he made a face and waved at her, “*dwarf* I’ve met?”

“As far as I know. We don’t need much help on the ground … as you can imagine, we’re pretty…”

“Fucking powerful.”

Ava offered a half-grin. “Yeah. Something like that. But we do have contacts … those we rely on. Those we routinely visit for backup. You’re mine.”

A thrill raced down her spine. The words had never felt more charged or dangerous, and devil knew she’d thought them before. Everything felt different now—different in ways she didn’t understand and couldn’t describe. Part of her expected to wake up at home, everything since the week before having been some horrible nightmare. Sebastian would be nothing but a forgotten memory then. The creation of a virgin mind.

Dante tilted his head. “Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why am I yours?”

Ava shrugged. “Because I like you,” she replied simply. “You’re fun.”

“Is that all?”

“I can also count on you when I need to.”

A sly, sinful grin spread across Dante’s lips. “That’s right,” he purred. “Which is why it doesn’t figure why you didn’t ring me up if you needed someone between your legs. I wouldn’t have left you high and dry.”

Ava stiffened, her body flushing cold. In a blink she had her defenses in place once more, a cold glare aimed at the jackass across the table. “You wouldn’t have gotten close enough to try.”

“Come on. You can’t tell me there’s not a part of you that hasn’t wondered what it



would be like.” He leaned forward and licked his lips, his eyes sparkling dangerously. “You and me. That lush little body spread out on my bed. Your pretty pussy wet and aching for my touch. Oh, sweetheart, the things I’d do to you. I’d have you screaming so hard you’d—”

Heat flamed her cheeks and her skin tingled in a way she had yet to grow accustomed to. Her body warmed at the thought—the nasty little temptation that was Dante. He’d eradicate Sebastian from her system, all right. He’d do things to her for which even Hell couldn’t have prepared her. And he’d destroy her in the process. Ava needed what Dante wouldn’t give, and she knew too damn well how he operated to run the risk.

“Stop it,” she said, then winced. Damn, she hated the desire in her voice. She’d gone so long without sex. Why in the world she suddenly found herself wet and needy at a few clumsy words completely boggled her mind. Perhaps *this* was why Luxi had wanted her to lose her virginity without strings attached. If she had desensitized herself to intimacy, she wouldn’t squirm so much at the thought of getting naked with anyone.

“You’re blushing,” Dante observed. “Wanna go for a spin?”

All right, that was more than enough of that. She threw back the rest of her beer before rising to her feet. “I think I’ve reached my quota for the night. I take it you’re not leaving town?”

Dante shook his head and sat back. “Someone’s touchy.”

“Bite me.”

“You keep saying that and I just might. Where you off to?”

“None of your business.”

He rolled his eyes. “Ava, you know I was just—”

“Yeah, yeah. Forgive me if I’m not in the mood.”

“And here I thought getting laid would’ve loosened you up a bit.”

She made a face, tossing some bills onto the table. “You know why it’ll never be you, Dante?” she snapped. “I won’t climb in the gutter to get my rocks off. You don’t deserve me, and you never have.”

In a thousand years, Ava would never forget the hurt that flooded his face. It was brief, so brief she nearly missed it, but it existed all the same. A glimpse into something she’d never seen, and something she didn’t want to consider. After all, if it turned out Dante had feelings—the sort she could hurt—the last peg of understanding she had left would shatter completely. Her friends were now enemies, her secrets were no longer secret, her family wanted her dead, and she might never again see the place she called home. Dante was the last pillar of normality remaining in her life. He couldn’t break too.

If she ever saw Sebastian again, she’d slice his wings off herself.

Dante’s mask was back in place by the time she gathered her bearings. Still, it didn’t make looking at him any easier. “I’ll see you around, I guess,” Ava said awkwardly. “And ... you know, don’t breathe a word of what I told you to anyone.”

She didn’t wait for a response. Dante might be a lot of things, but she trusted him with her secrets, which spoke for more than she cared to consider at the moment. It was easier to label him a horndog and leave it at that, but he’d never betrayed her confidence. Not once. Not even when she likely deserved it.

Like now.

*His eyes...*

Ava shook her head and pushed into the night air. It had to be a fluke. A happenstance of her already fucked up life. Dante didn't have feelings to hurt. She hadn't seen what she thought she'd seen. Case closed.

She hoped.

If the vampire had any sense about him, he'd take the hint and get the hell out of Dodge.

### Chapter Three

Every few seconds, Dante's face floated to the forefront of Ava's mind and sent her spiraling down a ravine of guilt and regret. Pairing Dante with any sort of actual feeling seemed strange, but on the off chance that she'd actually dealt a tangible blow, she decided to go out of her way to treat him nicely the next time their paths crossed. Hopefully, for the time being, he'd take the hint and skip town before her mood took a turn for the worst. Before she realized what damage her motor-mouth had wrought, and did something she'd regret.

She'd told him her secret. She'd told him the one thing she'd never told anyone. A secret others had died preserving. A secret Lucifer would gladly kill her to protect.

Ava shivered. The Sins weren't just an elite group of supernatural badasses—they were the only beings that stood between humanity and the pit. Lucifer regarded the Sins as his own children, coddling them when need be, but riding their asses the rest of the way. He might not love them, but he sure as hell loved having super spies in his arsenal. Even if he managed to talk himself out of killing Ava over this mess with Sebastian, there was no way he'd let Dante walk knowing what he knew.

Lucifer loved mind games. If she knew him, and Ava was certain she did, he would request hers be the hand that silenced the vampire forever.

The thought left her cold. She couldn't kill Dante. She didn't want to even think about it, or do anything beyond put the notion into their venomous trades. There was no one she loved fighting more. Encounters with Dante were invigorating. Enthralling. They served as foreplay for the mind.

*Not only for the mind.*

Ava frowned and shook the thought off with little success. Sexy he might be, but even with her mind awakened and noticing things like how her skin sizzled under his, or the strange, almost adoring way he looked at her, she was done with foreplay. As in forever.

And ever.

Ava cursed and shoved open her hotel room door, stopping short just as quickly. The room was occupied. "Luxi?"

Her sister, who stood admiring herself in the mirror, beamed and whirled around at the sound of her voice. Luxi was consequentially both the first and last person Ava wanted to see at the present, yet she couldn't deny the relief that rushed through her worn body any more than she could prevent her lips from tugging into a smile. "You're either gonna hug me or kill me."

The smile on Luxi's face dimmed a notch. "Aw, little sis," she drawled, taking a few steps toward the door. "Don't be like that."

"Well, your being here means my cover's blown, so which is it?"

Luxi rolled her eyes. "You're always so paranoid."

It wasn't even near the truth, but Ava let it slide. Luxuria had always been a drama queen. She got away with it mostly because she was fucking gorgeous and turned men and women alike into putty just by aiming a well-timed grin. With ringlets of shoulder-length coal-colored hair, red lips and a full but fit figure, Luxi had long ago become

accustomed to humans tripping over themselves just to get a glimpse of Lust in its purest form.

Not that they knew that last part.

Tonight, Luxi had donned a skin-tight pair of leather pants and a burgundy, lacy corset that looked seconds from unraveling to reveal her rather large breasts. Each of her wrists bore a silver cuff, and a tight collar fitted around her throat. She looked dangerous and seductive. She looked ... well, like Ava's sister. Her closest sister.

"I'm coming to make sure you're all right," Luxi explained softly.

"All right?"

"Yeah. And to tell you that you're in trouble."

Ava snickered. "Thanks. Next time, try for something I don't know."

"No, sweetie, this is big. Really big."

"I'm already up to my chin in big, Lux. Whatever you got isn't—"

"Look, Lucifer flipped his shit when Sebastian went home, and that's all well and good, but it ain't the full story."

"By all means," Ava said, gesturing in welcome. "Tell me the full story."

"You know the Lower Six?"

She nodded.

"Well, they're using this as an excuse to boost the lot of us out of a job."

Ava frowned. "Using ... what as an excuse?"

Luxi spread her arms demonstrably. "What do you think? Honey, look, this whole thing has gotten weird. Really weird. The Binsfeld Brigade thinks it's time to mess up the seating arrangement, and the others are freaking out, because this never happened when they reached maturity, and we're trying to figure—"

"Hey!"

"What?"

"Reached maturity?" Ava repeated.

Luxi held her stare for a long moment before sighing loudly. "Ava, the rest of us matured first. No one blames you for that, but I guess we just got to a place where we thought you'd never reach that point. You have been kind of a prude, you know."

Ava blinked again. "If you don't tell me what the hell you're talking about—"

"You embraced your nature."

"And I hadn't done that before?"

"Been absolutely one hundred percent greedy? No, hon. Not until last week."

Ava frowned. "So, by boning Sebastian, I ... reached maturity?"

"We all got there somehow." Luxi nodded, breaking into a fond, nostalgic grin.

"Mine was a young monk bathing in the monastery. I'd invoked desire in others before, but there was something about the way water beaded along his big—"

"I don't need to hear this."

"Point," Luxi said. "You hadn't reached that place yet, sweetie. It had to happen sometime ... we just didn't think it'd be an angel."

"No one did. I don't see how this is any different from the way things were when I left."

"Because of the Binsfeld Brigade."

Ava sighed harshly, sinking into the chair beside the window. The Binsfeld Brigade, or the Lower Six, consisted of a group of demons named by Peter Binsfeld in 1589 as

those he believed represented the Seven Deadly Sins. Lucifer sat at the top, of course, being the embodiment of pride in Christian tradition, but the rest were nothing more than a rowdy group of loudmouths who surfaced every few hundred years or so to possess a small child or stir up a Black Plague. Once receiving recognition from Binsfeld, they had made it their goal to overthrow the original Seven for the sake of honor, glory and all the other bells and whistles that came with being Lucifer's favored disciples. Needless to say, it hadn't blown over well. The Seven were a special breed due to the unique circumstances surrounding their creation, and Lucifer, aside from being partial, wasn't about to give up on creatures that could safely broach hallowed or sacred ground for the egos of second-rate demons. The uproar had been the loudest in the pit since the third assassination attempt on Judas.

"Let me get this straight," Ava said. "I, for the first time in two thousand years, decided to bend the rules a bit, which is something you, Invi, Gula, and especially Ira have done over and over. But because this is my *first offense*, the Binsfeld Brigade thinks this whole thing is a reason to give us the boot."

"Bingo," Luxi agreed. "Since it *is* you, and not me or one of the less perfect children, it gives the Lower Six ammo. And the others are all in a tizzy, because, as I said, this never happened once they reached maturity."

Ava scoffed, but didn't say anything. The term grated her nerves.

"Huff and puff all you want, missy, but it's the truth," her sister said. "When, prior to your little angel, had you ever wanted something you couldn't have? Had you ever bent the rules so you could have something for yourself? When have you ever wanted *anything*?"

"Right now I want to be left alone. Does that count?"

"You're just pissy 'cause you know I'm right."

"I'm pissy because I'm having the worst week a girl could have. What do you want, Lux?" Ava spread her arms. "Are you here to turn me in? Hogtie me so the others can begin the lynching? I didn't tell Sebastian anything. I didn't—"

"He saw you in the Vatican, sweetie. If he's a smart angel, he'll know that's impossible if you're just a demon."

"He won't betray that."

The pity on Luxi's face nearly choked her. Ava's vision blurred with tears, but damn it, she wouldn't cry. Not now. *Not now. Rein it in.*

"He's an angel."

"I know." The words sounded pathetic. At that moment, Ava would have liked nothing more than to rip Sebastian's head off his perfectly angelic shoulders for all the trouble he'd caused. For the pain she suffered. "Look ... Lux..."

"I came here because I love you."

"I know."

"And the next time, it won't be like this. The others love you too. Invi, Gula, all of them ... but we have to be careful how things go from here." Luxi frowned. "If Lucifer decides to give the Lower Six a chance to prove themselves capable of managing the sinload, what becomes of us? They're demons, we're not. Take away our reason to exist and what do we have? They're scared, little sis. We all are."

Ava nodded dazedly, sinking farther into her seat. A dull, foreign hum filled her ears, the rest of the world blinking out as Luxi's words took shape and meaning. Her insides

flushed cold and her skin went limp and numb. Not just her. Crap, she'd been a self-absorbed idiot. The bigger picture was always easier to see when handed a blueprint, but she should have realized it sooner. Beyond preserving her own ass, now her brothers and sisters were on the line. All for the foolishly simple act of love, or infatuation, or whatever the hell had persuaded her to believe Sebastian's righteous bullshit.

One act of impulsion, one act of selfishness, had thrown the sanctity of everything she knew into play. Not in an eternity had she thought it possible to jeopardize her siblings' fate. And with Luxi's sad, too-compassionate eyes and the weight of everything else falling squarely on her shoulders, it took everything she had not to burst into tears.

"I was so fucking stupid," Ava whispered, hating herself. Thankfully, Luxi didn't play dumb. In easy seconds, Ava found herself in her sister's arms, and though her gut twisted she couldn't refuse the comfort offered. It might be the last she'd get.

"Oh, sweetie," Luxi murmured, stroking her hair. "It's all right."

Tears came then—Ava couldn't stop them. "I fucked everything up."

"Love tends to do that."

"He was an angel, goddamn it. He wasn't supposed to do this to me."

Luxi snorted and pulled back. "Angels are the most selfish, conceited, arrogant asshats around. They'll do anything to charm their way into your pants. Believe me, been there, screwed that."

Ava hiccupped miserably, wiping her cheeks. "Where were you last week?"

"Telling you this, but you wouldn't listen. Love does that, kid. It fucks with your head and good."

"I learned my lesson."

"The Jilted Lover's Club is always open." Luxi gave her a knowing look. "You don't hop from bed to bed without learning a thing or two about what *not* to do."

Ava couldn't quite imagine her sister in love or anywhere near her own state of depression, but the words soothed the rage inside her chest, sincere or otherwise.

"All right," Luxi said. "I'd better hit the road and see if I can pick up anything else. If it's safe, I'll try to come back and give you an update."

"Tell the others I love them. And I'm sorry."

"They know."

"And if it's at all possible, not to kill me."

Luxi pursed her lips and didn't respond, though the conflict on her face spoke for more than Ava needed to hear. It wouldn't be up to them, she knew. It was up to Lucifer. Still, if she were to die, she'd prefer it at the hands of the Prince of Lies rather than her true family.

When Ava glanced up, Luxi had vanished. The hotel room felt large and empty.

In all her years, all her experience, all the countless assignments and souls she'd been sent to tempt, Ava had never felt alone. She hadn't understood it—she hadn't comprehended how anyone in a world so populous could feel completely isolated. It hadn't made any sense.

For the first time, she understood. Ignorance was truly bliss.

\* \* \* \*

Dante couldn't say what had motivated him to follow her scent. Perhaps it was habit, perhaps it was need, perhaps it was the fact he'd hauled ass across the country once

hearing the rumors concerning her star-crossed romance. Regardless of the cause, he'd come here for her, damn it. Wasn't as if he particularly enjoyed getting his ego shoved down his throat or hearing her voice words he'd known for centuries to be true. He might not be worthy of Ava, but they meant something to each other whether she admitted it or not.

His logical side told him her earlier venom hadn't been aimed solely at him, rather at her dearly departed lover boy and the situation at her feet. Still, attempting logic when all Dante wanted to do was throw himself at her, everything on the table, didn't do much to settle the hurt. He'd pined after her too long to walk away unscathed. He had since the first time his tired, bloodied eyes saw her frustrated face. At the time, seven hundred years earlier, he'd written off his feelings as gratitude. After all, a gorgeous woman appearing from nowhere to save him from a brutal and assuredly fatal flogging during the Inquisition had rendered him awestruck and beyond thankful.

Dante hadn't been the only rescued demon that night, but he was the only one who hadn't immediately fled upon release. Ava inspired too many questions, too much need and such ardent admiration, he'd stuck around. Days turned into weeks, then months. Over the course of their relationship, he'd done everything he could to help her when she needed it, admiring her all the way.

The fact she'd turned to an angel hurt like a bitch. Sebastian hadn't helped her up on a battlefield or listened to her bitch endlessly about whatever happened to be on her mind, or smile at her in victory or tend her wounds in defeat. Sebastian didn't deserve her loyalty or her affection, and the fact he'd touched both cut deeper than any wound Dante had ever experienced.

Sebastian wasn't the one tracking Ava down to her shitty hotel room just to make sure she was all right. Granted, Dante's motives weren't exactly pure, but he needed to be here. He needed to be near her. He needed to touch her more than anything. Show her what he so completely failed in saying.

"Ah, good," a soft, feminine voice purred from behind. "You made it."

Dante whirled around, his gaze landing on the most outrageously gorgeous woman he'd ever seen. Still, his shock at her beauty in no way outweighed his irritation or surprise. His inner demon roared and his fangs tickled his gums, aching to descend. "Who the fuck are you?"

"Charming," the siren said, smirking.

"Try me," he spat. "Stay the hell away from her, you hear?"

From where those words came, he didn't know. All he knew was how suddenly aware he was of their proximity to Ava, and the frantic notion he'd led some demonic bounty hunter to collect.

"Relax, vampire, I'm a friend. And, coincidentally, the reason you're here." She held up a hand. "Name's Luxi. I'm Ava's sister."

"Sister?"

"Yeah. I know we haven't met, but based on what she's told me about you, you weren't too hard to find." Luxi's gaze raked down his body with interest. "My, my, my, does little sis have good taste, or what?"

Dante frowned. "What?"

"Well, you're a stud. Not really my type, granted, but I do love me some pretty." She grinned and raised her hands far above her head, her breasts thrusting forward in a move

so staged she should have it patented. "But you're not here for me."

"No," he said shortly, shoulders tensing.

"Yeah, I figured with how hopelessly dedicated you are to my girl you have something personal at stake." She shrugged. "Invi and I found you and worked our magic. *Voilà*. Here ye be."

"Invi."

Luxi inclined her head. "My other sister."

"Right." Knowing what he knew now, piecing together Ms. Come Fuck Me and her sister's roles didn't seem much of a stretch. Strange how a little perception changed a fuckload. Envy and lust had played a hand in finding Ava so quickly. Who would have thought?

"You don't seem surprised."

Dante shrugged. He wasn't, but he damn sure wouldn't tell her why. "Haven't had a family in a few centuries, but I remember how damn imposing they can be. You gals knew I'm a friend and—"

"Please," Luxi retorted, rolling her eyes.

"What?"

"Let's just say my influence can only go so far. Whatever else dragged you down here was at your own doing, partner." She flashed him an annoyingly knowing grin. "You've got the hots for my sister."

"I'd guess most every red-blooded male has the hots for your sister," Dante replied.

"Yeah, but here's the thing..." Luxi linked her hands behind her back and took a coy step forward. "Most of those guys forget Ava and start drooling over yours truly once we cross paths. You seem annoyed, if nothing else."

He snorted. "So you find one guy who doesn't immediately fawn over you and your precious ego's wounded? Sorry, but that's pathetic."

"Do I look upset?"

"Don't particularly care how you look."

Luxi just grinned. "That's sweet, sweetie. My point is, you've got it bad for Ava, and that's ... well, cute. But as you know, she's already seen what becomes of most romances—"

"I'm here as a friend."

"Who wants into her pants."

Dante shrugged again. There seemed little point in lying.

Luxi's expression brightened. "Yeah. And before I say this, let me preface: I know your little crush is more than a crush, and I think you could do her some good. Even so, Ava's not some girl you fuck and boot the next day, you got me? You hurt my sister any more than she's already been hurt, and no kidding, the full wrath of Hell itself will come crashing down on you."

Ah, there it was. The not-so-empty threat. Obligatory and fierce, and just telling enough to betray how much Ava meant to her family. Dante nodded and smiled. "When she hurts, I hurt. If I'm ever the source of her pain, you'll just have to off me before I do it myself."

"Brave words."

Perhaps, but they had the advantage of likewise being true. He shrugged with a soft grin. "What can I say?"



A long beat lapsed between them, Luxi searching his face until finding what she needed to call off her defenses. “Good. The fam’s coming in soon.”

“The fam?”

“The whole lot of us.”

Somehow, the prospect of the Seven Deadly Sins gathering in one area did not strike Dante as happy fun times, but he didn’t betray his misgivings. Whatever else, Ava would need his support. She’d need him, whether she liked it or not. “Ah-huh. And when will this merry event take place?”

“Whenever it does,” Luxi replied. “Soon, I’m guessing ... once a decision is reached. We’re a hard group to coordinate.”

He could only imagine.

“In the meantime,” she continued, “stick close to her. She doesn’t need to be alone right now.”

“I think I can manage that.”

“Something told me you could.”

## Chapter Four

The air hummed as though charged with static. It was symptomatic of demonic energy—something most humans didn't feel and most otherworldly creatures tried to avoid. Ava greeted it with resignation. Demons, especially higher demons, were solitary creatures. Working in packs was something that typically resulted in elevated egos and a thousand theories on what was the best method to reap chaos. The air didn't hum with just one demon, which meant many somethings were out there. Her sanctuary was truly compromised.

Only a matter of time now. Luxi had found her without issue, as had Dante. From where the vampire had even heard about her disgrace, she didn't know. Thinking she could outrun Hell had been a foolish venture.

It amazed her how easy giving up everything had seemed just a week ago—how quickly her defenses had fallen, and how easily everything had unraveled. To think, just a few days prior, Ava had felt happier than she had in the whole of her existence. She'd laughed for the right reasons, swooned and smiled. She hadn't a care in the world, for her last paycheck had been signed and she had enough to settle in for early retirement.

An older, wiser Ava now wandered aimlessly down an old country road, having given up on the concept of sleep. Her mind ran rampant with images of her siblings tearing her limb from limb as the Binsfeld Brigade cackled a chorus of "I told you so." She saw Sebastian at a distance, a look of grave indifference on his face. And from nowhere, Dante holding out a hand, offering sanctuary from an otherwise cruel existence.

Sleep couldn't conquer a plagued mind. Ava hardly slept as it was, and she didn't want to lure her problems into a dream world where anything could happen. Thus, she'd donned a pair of sweats, wiggled her feet into sneakers, thrown on a tank top and set out again on the quiet Natchez streets. Unlike large cities, the traffic had nearly come to a complete stop, save for the few rowdy teenagers and the drug thugs.

Ava huffed and tossed her hair over her shoulder. It seemed eons had passed since the few days she'd spent in Sebastian's embrace, entangled in a mess of sheets and experiencing sensations she hadn't known to miss. The existence she'd known up until last week and the reality of the present made everything—the air, the streetlights, even her own tentative breaths—seem dreamlike. Her ego had taken a hell of a beating, sure, and now she didn't know where she stood with her family, her boss, or where she would awaken tomorrow.

Still, nothing could shake her bewilderment. Ava had been a careful girl for a long, long time. Falling in love and stripping her panties for some angel just didn't seem like her. It had felt amazing as hell, sure, but hindsight had a funny way of distorting the truth. Perhaps Luxi was right—perhaps she had just been long overdue for a moment of absolute greed.

She'd wanted too much.

Ava shuddered. Time had a way of warping perspective, even in the span of just a few days. The sick feeling she'd experienced earlier in the cemetery returned, but even now she understood why her heart felt ill. If Sebastian swooped back to Earth and professed his love, she'd kick his self-righteous ass.

Sebastian hadn't been the love of her eternity. Rather, he embodied what she'd always wanted. He was freedom. He was her ticket out.

Crap, she hated she was so predictable. Every demon had a sob story after a few millennia, and she supposed Sebastian was hers. Spend so much time among Big J's favored children, and she felt entitled to the same freedoms they enjoyed. Sebastian had been her ticket. Her way out. Her escape plan.

For that one act of greed, Ava had thrown everyone she loved under the proverbial bus. She understood now. She understood why her siblings were upset, beyond having forfeited their secret. She understood why Lucifer wanted her head. She even understood why the Binsfeld Brigade was after her blood.

And she'd never felt so alone.

Ava turned down a wooded path, crossing her arms. The air felt thicker here, almost electric. Something was close. One of her demon admirers, a brother or sister, or Lucifer himself, she didn't know. Sleep remained a distant yearning. She wouldn't get any rest with so much in the air.

The path broke into a fork. A sign on the left announcing what lay ahead was one of the tour houses, this one called Longbourne. It stood as one of the many monuments to the Civil War left behind and relegated to history buffs and field trips, so the current generation could experience what became of their ancestors and speculate how people in America had lived prior to TiVo. Every step she took made her skin tingle.

Something waited at the end of the path—something that had drawn her here utilized the ethereal pull to coax her feet in this direction. Ava stared down the darkness ahead. She wished she weren't alone, but damn, she wanted to get this over with rather than wait for the shit to fall. Thus, with a deep breath, she took a step forward.

Bravado was much easier in theory. She was accustomed to fighting her own battles, sure, but with the weight and fury of Hell at her back. Out of nowhere, it occurred to her Lucifer could at any time cut off her power supply, rendering her small and helpless, essentially human. The revelation shocked her, yanking her out of the dreamlike stupor that had enticed her from the false security of her rented room and into the unknown dark.

Luxi's visit had her on edge. Perhaps Ava had placed too much stock in her refuge, thinking her choice of venue would buy her at least a little time. She'd fought off a group of demons earlier, thinking she had the strength to end them if she liked, but it remained entirely possible Dante's entrance had saved her life.

Damn, what a gloomy thought.

Dark woods. Night. Preternatural uneasy feeling. By rule of thumb, it took a lot to creep Ava out. She'd seen, experienced and wrought too much destruction on her various conquests to come down with the heebie jeebies. Walking up a wooded pathway seemed on paper a piece of cake. Something she could do with her eyes closed were she so inclined.

"Okay," Ava whispered loudly, "I'm not creeped out. I am a badass. Badasses do not get creeped out. And yes, all the healthy people I know talk to themselves, so I'm obviously of sound mind." Gravel crunched beneath her feet. Bugs chirped and the wind made love to newly budding leaves. Above her, clouds rolled against the ominously darkened sky. "I am absolutely out of my mind."

"Are you?"

Ava whirled around. He was there. Of course he was there. There was no way their paths wouldn't cross again. For this, she was seemingly destined. Wherever she went in Natchez, Dante would be with her. No matter how she tried to shake him he wouldn't let go.

"That's a hoot," Dante continued with a grin, taking slow, intentional steps forward. "'Cause just a second ago you were of sound mind."

"Fuck me."

"With pleasure."

She chose to ignore that. "What are you doing here?" It was a redundant question. They both knew perfectly well what he was doing here, thus it came to no surprise when he ignored her question.

"Now I'm a man who knows my crazies," he drawled instead.

"I'll say."

"And while I'll give you points for effort, I gotta say you lack the essentials." Dante's grin broadened as he shrugged, hands diving into his pockets. "Ava, gotta admit, never pegged you one for breaking and entering."

"Breaking and entering?"

"That's what you're doing, right?" he said. "Isn't this one of those touristy places?"

The accusation—or the hint of one—left her feeling bitter and foolish. To the layman, her actions would seem crazy. To anyone who knew her, though, it was preemptive. Therefore, she wiggled self-consciously and said, "I felt something."

He grinned. "I'll say."

"Dante..."

"Figures you, err, *dwarf* types to follow your tinglies in the dead of night." He rocked slightly on his heels. "What are we doing?"

"I am ... none of your business," Ava retorted, crossing her arms and cocking her head. "What are *you* doing here?"

Dante shrugged. "What's it look like?"

"Wasting my time?"

"I'm helping."

"Helping?"

He nodded as though it were the most obvious thing in the world. "I got nothing better to do."

Ava just stared at him for a second. "No."

"No what?"

"*No* to this. *No* to you helping. *No* to everything."

Dante pouted. "Why not?" he whined. "You got no one else, do you?"

"There are plenty of demons I could call on if I wanted." Okay, so that was a lie, but it was the only one she had.

"But none others that are yours. I'm here for a reason, you know." Dante's head tilted as he studied her. "You need me."

Ava reeled. "No."

"There's the makings of a good argument."

"Dante—"

"What've you got to lose?" he demanded.

"Not much. I'd prefer to hold onto what I have left."

Dante glowered. "Fine then. Have it your way. Just figured you wouldn't mind a bit of company, seeing as you're chatting *yourself* up to keep from going crazy. I'll be on my way then." He waved and backtracked down the path. "Cheers."

It was the most pathetic bluff she'd ever heard, yet as Dante's familiar form faded into shadow, part of her succumbed to panic. She really didn't want to be alone, another thing that seemed good on paper yet failed miserably in reality. Thus before she could reconsider, she heard herself call after him.

His answering grin was the one of a canary-stuffed cat. "Miss me already?"

Ava sighed and wagged a finger at him. "Don't make me regret this."

Dante just shrugged, not bothering to hide his satisfaction as he took his place at her side. "Not much chance of that, is there?"

No, there really wasn't.

Yet as they started up the path, side-by-side, Ava couldn't bring herself to mind.

## Chapter Five

Dante had stopped questioning things. His purpose, the fight, the tired indifference with which Ava had regarded him earlier tonight, even the secrets she'd shared without much provocation. The appearance of her sister, along with the cryptic warnings of what was to come, left him with little option. He'd promised Luxi he'd stick close to Ava, and so he had. The second her door opened, he'd been en route behind her, cautious and a little more than surprised it took announcing his presence before she responded to it.

Ava wasn't safe. Not from the otherworldly baddies on her tail, not from her family, and certainly not from herself. The world could have crashed around her and she wouldn't have noticed. Dante had hoped what he'd seen at the diner was a fluke, but he'd known better. His Ava didn't allow herself to become distracted, yet her mask of emptiness had yet to uproot. "You never finished telling me," he said, desperate to break the silence.

She didn't even spare him a glance. "Telling you what?"

"What happened with the cardinal and your angel."

"Yeah," Ava replied, her tone clipped. "I told you something else instead."

The secret of her origin. The root of her power. Who she was in actuality. "I remember."

"I don't feel like talking right now, okay?"

Dante shrugged. "Might help."

"I don't remember it helping earlier."

"Come on, sweetheart. Give me a chance."

"I've given you plenty." Yet her steps had slowed and her voice encouraged prompting.

He hazarded a glance, but she had drifted off again, somewhere deep in the recesses of that gorgeous mind. Somewhere with him. Her winged knight. A shiver of pure, raw jealousy danced down his spine. Fuck, he hated this. Desperate to shove off the sudden barrage of unwanted images, featuring Ava entangled in the arms of another, Dante reached for her hand on impulse. She jerked in surprise, but didn't recoil. Rather, she stopped shortly, her uncertain gaze clashing with his. "Talk to me," Dante whispered.

"About what?"

"Everything. Anything. I want to know."

Confusion marred her face. "Why?"

"Because."

"Not good enough."

"I care about you." It was the truth, or as close as she'd get without giving a little in turn. "Let me in, Ava."

She stared at him for a long beat before looking away, shaking her head with a heavy sigh. "I don't get you sometimes," she said. "Well, a lot of the time. You're a complete jackass, you know. Vulgar and annoying and—"

"On your side."

"I don't even know if I have a side to be on."

"You keep me around for a reason, remember? You even owned up to liking me

earlier.”

Ava snorted. “Big mistake.” She fell silent for another moment, studying the ground between their feet. Seconds lapsed into minutes and he waited because, damn it, she wouldn’t elude him this time. No one could keep everything bottled up all the time. He didn’t care how strong she was. Then, at last, the tension in her shoulders relaxed and her personal wall offered a small, nearly indiscernible opening. Dante’s throat tightened. These glimpses were precious, and he wouldn’t take them for granted.

“I’m in trouble,” she said softly.

“I know.”

“No, you don’t. I didn’t even know until earlier. My sister paid me a visit.”

“Me too.”

Her head snapped up. “What? Luxi came to you?”

Dante winced. He hadn’t exactly meant to let that much slip, but there seemed little advantage in hiding things from her. If he wanted her trust—all of it—he needed to be forthcoming. “Yeah. I followed you to your hotel.”

“You what?”

“I just wanted to make sure you got there all right.”

“And you became a gentleman when?”

He expelled a deep breath. “Look, believe me or don’t. You’re not yourself and you know it. You’re distracted and bitchier than usual, and though you took a battleaxe to my pride earlier, that doesn’t mean I care about you any less.”

At that, her expression softened. “Sorry.”

“Don’t mention it.”

“No, I meant for what I said.”

Dante managed to hide his grin. It was a small allowance, but an allowance all the same. Ava didn’t apologize often. “Nothing I didn’t deserve, I’m sure. Point is, your sister introduced herself and told me to stick close to you.”

“She did, did she?”

“She also said she’s the reason I’m here, whatever that means.”

Ava cocked an eyebrow. “She’s Lust, Dante. That’s what she does. She sends men and women and demons and whatever else after what they lust.”

At that, he cracked a small smile. “Can’t blame a fella for liking what he sees, can you?”

“I’m small potatoes. Luxi probably had you drooling up a monsoon.”

“Not really.”

Ava’s stare became dubious. “Whatever. Men don’t just *look* at Luxi. They drop their pants. A guy like you—”

“I won’t lie. Your sister’s a looker, but...” He stopped, frowning. The words *she’s not you* rode too close to the tip of his tongue. Even if they knew freedom, Ava wouldn’t believe it.

“But?”

“Dunno,” Dante said instead. “She’s ... not my type.”

Another incredulous laugh bubbled off her lips. “Whatever. Every type is your type.”

“Not now.”

“When did this start?”

Around the time he found out Ava’s heart could be captured, and waiting for her

wasn't a lost effort. Meaningless sex lost its flavor once the woman he truly craved stood within distance. Yet he wouldn't say that, either. "Dunno," he said again. "Just did."

"Mhmm."

"Tell me what happened."

Ava didn't ask again to what he referred. Instead, her expression drew distant again, her body tightening. "There's not much to tell," she said. "It happened quickly. We were both sent after the same cardinal whose faith was on the verge of complete collapse. Sebastian was a sentinel or something. Guardian angel, if you like. I was sent to tempt Cardinal Gregori with material things. Money, normality, et cetera. If I didn't seal the deal, Invi would go next. Then Luxi. She's always our ace in the hole, Luxi is. It never came to that. Sebastian headed me off, and I just ... I dunno. It was strange. I'd never seen an angel before."

"Yeah?"

She nodded. "I guess he just made me want things I'd never wanted before. Luxi told me it was a maturity thing. All of us—umm—dwarfs have to embody what we represent, and I just never had. I wanted for the first time. I wanted my own existence, my own freedom, my own ability to do whatever I pleased and go wherever I wanted to go. It seems so silly now ... but Sebastian was that for me. We just ... fell into each other."

Dante's jaw tightened, but he didn't interrupt.

"We planned to leave," Ava continued. "I went to Lucifer, and he went to Big J. Lucifer was so ... well, ecstatic I'd convinced an angel to fall he all but made me honorary Queen of Hell for a day. In order for everything to be final, Sebastian and I had to form a blood bond. It would taint him, classifying him as One of the Fallen, and inject me with just enough holiness to keep me from ever being able to enter Hell again. Sebastian wouldn't be able to go back to Paradise, of course, but that was fine with him. He wanted what I wanted—to experience something other than undying servitude. But when I got back to this realm, he was gone. He'd left me a letter explaining—"

"He left you a Dear Jane letter?"

"Yeah." Ava snickered. "Didn't even have the balls to do it in person. And here I've wondered if we'd just completed the bond before I turned in my resignation ... but then I wouldn't have been able to explain everything to Lucifer. I'm his creation, you know? I'm one of the ... the things that can go anywhere and do anything. I wanted to be on good terms when I left because, rotten as it was in parts, I owed everything to him and my family. Sebastian didn't owe Big J shit, but the thought of being ostracized from Paradise was too difficult for him. Without me there, he said, it was easier for him to see clearly. So he left before I could confuse things for him again ... and since the Fallen can't reenter Paradise, Lucifer saw me as a traitor."

Dante blinked. "Radical leap."

"Sebastian could tell Big J everything about me," Ava reasoned. "And if Big J is half as smart as the Christian world says he is, putting two and two together shouldn't take much. He'd figure out what I was—or that I wasn't just a run-of-the-mill demon."

"And the boss-man wouldn't let you explain?"

She shrugged. "I don't know, to be honest. Invi and Gula waited for me at my place and told me to run. Everything was so frazzled and it seemed like a rational idea. I took off before thinking."

He offered a solemn nod. There seemed little else to do. "And now?"



“Now I think taking off was the mother of bad ideas.” Ava sighed. “It just makes everything look more incriminating. The stupid thing is I’ve always made fun of people who run in the face of accusation. I never really got it, you know? How scary it is. How your first instinct is to get the fuck away.” She cast him a miserable glance before shaking her head. “Everything was so jumbled. I didn’t know what to do or how to respond or even who to blame.”

“Hope you don’t have that problem now.”

“I don’t. Sebastian was a self-righteous asshole.”

Dante smothered a grin. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” Ava trembled and crossed her arms. “I just wish ... my mind is a warzone right now. I have my family looking for me—”

“Even though they told you to run?”

“Yeah, well, that wasn’t exactly advisable. Luxi didn’t say anything, but I’ve heard here and there that Lucifer was furious. And the Binsfeld Brigade—”

“The what?”

“Long story,” she replied, waving a hand. “Bunch of assholes who think they’re above everyone when they’re not. Luxi told me they were looking to capitalize on my misfortune.”

“How?”

“Beats me. These guys have had it in their heads they’d be better for this gig for a long time now. I figure they were just waiting for one of us to mess up.”

He nodded, though he didn’t really understand. It didn’t matter. Ava rambled onward as though desperate to get everything out before the weight consumed her.

“So I have my family after me, Lucifer pissed, the Binsfeld Brigade looking to get my siblings fired and an asshole angel who promised me the world and left me in the gutter.” Her voice broke then, and carried his heart with it. “Damn it, Dante, he was an angel. A fucking angel, you know? He was supposed to be safe and honorable and ... I dunno ... worth the wait.”

Dante didn’t say anything. He couldn’t. At once, and without warning, his mind overloaded with a thousand familiar fantasies. Images of her that had plagued him for years, and would continue to ravage his mind until the end of time. He saw her a thousand ways: her perfect body, her soft, supple curves, her strong thighs, her firm, delicious breasts, and her pussy—fuck, how he longed to explore her. Spread her with his fingers and delve into her body, lap at her tender flesh and sample her juices until her legs closed around his head and squeezed him so good he’d suffocate were he anything but a vampire. He saw them together, limbs entwined, bodies moving, her mouth suckling greedily on his cock before he took her again and again and again...

It was too sweet to be reality, but he was truly at her side. Walking with her up the wooded path toward some Southern castle. Dante was at Ava’s side, and she allowed it. She wanted him with her ... though likely not in the same sense in which he wanted her. Under him. Around him. Squeezing him until the stars fell from Heaven. Holding him close to her soft, sweet body as he trembled.

He needed a taste.

Though something told him that were he to say anything, Ava wouldn’t react the way he wanted. So he walked at her side as the palatial home came into sight, a silhouette against a darkening canvas.

Then, at once, his chest tightened with awareness—a hold that had nothing to do with the spitfire at his side. Something was different. It started quietly, an inward itch he couldn't address, rather accept until it faded. Only it didn't fade, it expanded. His veins hardened and his unbeating heart became, if possible, even more inert. The farther they traveled the more certain he became. Something was wrong ... something that forced his cold insides colder with an unexpected wave of foreboding. As a creature of the night, it took quite a bit to make him shiver ... but this was different.

This was something else. "Uh..."

Ava glanced up sharply. "You feel something?"

"You too?"

"Yeah. I felt it before you showed up, but it disappeared." She licked her lips, which had his attention drawn to her tongue before it disappeared back inside her perfectly kissable mouth. Oblivious. The silly woman had no idea how much a temptation she was. "Crap, this is not good."

His stomach tightened. It had been a good hundred years or so since he last experienced nausea, but he definitely remembered how it felt. Any second he would vomit up blood, and Sin or not, Creature of Hell or not, that was something no woman wanted to see. "What?" Dante managed to choke out.

"Anything that draws enough energy for you to feel it has to be something big." Ava stole a hesitant step forward. "Demon."

"Demon?"

"Yeah." She looked at him warily, a sort of glance that looked without seeing. "On this realm, they call to us dwarfy types by sending out an energy signature."

"What?"

"As Lucifer's chosen, we occasionally act as consultants on certain assignments. Demonic possessions, curses, general mischief." Her focus slowly drew back to the darkness ahead. "It's something we follow without thinking, really."

"You know what you might wanna do now?"

"Ignore it?"

Dante nodded. He could barely feel his fingers now. "Fuck knows, I would."

There must have been something in his voice to draw her back to herself. At last, Ava paused and favored him with a long, speculative look. "Dante?"

Christ, she sounded worried. Or perhaps he just hoped it was worry. There was no telling these days. There was likewise no denying the sick sensation gripping his stomach, flooding his veins with cold, but similarly inspiring his pale skin to break into a sweat. His feet hardened further into lead with every step forward. He truly did not wish to explore the grounds. Yet likewise, even when he tried to forcibly bring himself to a halt he found himself incapable. Something dragged him forward.

"Shit."

"What?"

"It's a hell-demon."

"What?"

"Damn it, Dante, you shouldn't have come with me."

His eyes widened. "Bit late for that!"

"It's here. You feel it, don't you?"

"I'm feeling something all right."

"It's here." Ava's breaths became hurried and excited. "Listen," she whispered. "Hell-demons are higher demons, okay? They have a pull against earthbound demons, and don't particularly like it when their territory is challenged."

Gee. Now she mentioned it. "What do you mean by pull?" he demanded.

"I mean he has the ability to voodoo you and good. You need to get out of here," Ava concluded, her hand clamping around his wrist and squeezing hard. "Now."

"Love the sentiment, sweetheart, but that's a bit easier said than done."

They stood right before the home now. The small pathway leading to the back entrance swerved to the right, but his feet carried him no farther. There was something here—something he might have felt once or twice before but never this potent.

"Dante?"

Somehow, he found the willpower to nod. "There."

"There?"

"I feel it. It's there. I can't..." His legs aimed in a new direction now, one veering from the pathway altogether and heading for the front door. "Ava..."

"Stay with me."

"I'm trying!"

"Dante, listen to me." The edge in her voice vanished, replaced by a soothing calm that nearly surprised him as much as the sudden inability to control which direction his legs were pointed. "Whatever you're feeling right now is a lie."

"Sorry," he snapped. "Could you vague it up a little?"

Ava wrapped her hand around his arm. God, she had a firm grip. Enough to stop him from moving, of course, but not enough to prevent the urge in his body from propelling him forward. "The demon's trying to tell you he is in charge of your body. Fight it. Stay with me, otherwise you're a walking target."

"Yeah, getting that." Digging his heels into the ground seemed cartoonish, but he wasn't above it. "Next time you tell me to leave you alone, believe me—"

"You'll ignore me and get yourself into another mess."

Dante flashed her a grin, awkward as it was. "You know me so well."

It was maddening how cute she looked when irritated—it was maddening he had to notice it at all, especially at such a time when he had seemingly lost possession of his body. One would think there would be more pressing matters to occupy his mind, but the damn girl had him blinded.

That was until the doors of the manor swung open and a shadowy figure swept down the front steps. It was archetypal, really, in a way that would have made Dante laugh if humor were attainable through the already dueling sensations of being helpless and aroused by the fiery spitfire at his side. It didn't walk so much as glided across the ground, and though its head was shrouded, Dante felt its attention narrow on him. "What the fuck," he said loudly.

Ava took a step forward, all but shoving him behind her. "Mammon!" she shouted. "If that's you, you've got a lot of nerve."

"Who the hell is Mammon?" Dante hissed.

She didn't even spare him a glance. "One of the Binsfeld boys. He's the one who wants my job."

"And he wants it through me?"

"He's showing me he can control you," she replied calmly. "I'm going to show him

he can't."

The shadowy figure didn't reply, rather outstretched a single arm, then motioned to the object it carried in the other.

Dante's voice hit a shrill, "Ava!"

"It's a collection box," she explained simply. "Higher demons often carry them."

Lovely how she could remain so calm under such circumstances. His insides were at war, but all was well in the world according to Ava. "Thanks for that. It explains so much."

"Just let me handle this."

The words seemed distant and ridiculous. Dante couldn't tear his gaze away from the small silver sachet. And then for no reason whatsoever, something happened. The war pounding his temples washed away as though it had never been. The glow of the collection box, the gentle hum, the soothing, irresistible lull of its well-kept secrets. These wore away at his resistance before melting it entirely. The lure of the box was too much. He needed it. He needed it like he needed blood. Needed the box. Needed to crawl inside. Needed to see what secrets it harbored. Needed...

"Lemme go," Dante ordered suddenly, surprising himself at first with his words, but speaking only confirmed the abrupt burn in his chest. "Ava—"

The grip on his arm tightened. "No, we need to get you out of here."

"Don't tell me what I need!" Fangs tore through his gums and he pulled against her. Away from her. The box was so close. So close... "I'll rip your throat out and—"

In a blink she was in front of him, her body between his and the demon she called Mammon. "Shut up," she snapped.

Then she captured his cheeks between her hands and brought his mouth crashing down upon her own. And all thought of the collection box or the demon in the black robes vanished. Dante moaned, his demon receding, all fight abandoning him as his body seized what it wanted above all else. Ava was against him. Ava's lips molded to his. *Ava*. Everything around him ceased to exist. The ground vanished, the house faded, and Mammon merged into nothing. Reality blinked away, and there was nothing but the pure, unadulterated truth of Ava. The way her lips spoke against him, brushing his with softness Dante had never before touched. Not with anyone. Not this—this tenderness, this gentleness. Her mouth moved with girlish curiosity, consuming him with her richness. Her taste. Her *good*.

The kiss hadn't been planned—she was far too tense to have acted on anything but impulse. For what cause, he knew not, but he was there to catch her when her body relaxed. When her lips parted with a pleased sigh, his eager tongue dove into her wet, wonderful mouth. Exploring, searching, drawing in as much of her taste as possible. Committing her to memory. There was little chance he'd get to savor her again. But she was here—against him, kissing him with enthusiasm. Holding his chin to anchor him into her mouth with small, hungry murmurs scratching her throat. There was no way to tell if she was aware of herself for the way she leaned into him, her hips swaying against his, rubbing herself against the iron hardness at his crotch, but he was too far gone to care. All that mattered was that she did.

"Fuck," he panted. "Ava..."

A pause. He worried his voice had broken the spell around him, but only for an instant. She kissed him again before he could miss her warmth, blinking away coherent

thought. All he knew was her heat. Her liquid fire. The scent of her arousal attacked him without warning, teasing his taste buds, flooding his nostrils and confirming what he already knew. He was lost. Dante was completely lost in Ava. For whatever reason, he was hers.

“Ava...” Her name rolled between them on a groan as he sucked at her lower lip. “Want ... fuck ... want you so much...” Then she was gone, and the loss was crushing. Dante's eyes flew open.

“You with me?” she demanded, breathless and flustered. That much was satisfying. Good to know her feathers weren't beyond ruffling.

Not that he paid much attention to anything but her moist pink lips, swollen by his ardor. That couldn't be it. She couldn't deny him her kisses. She couldn't give him so much without giving him anything at all—no, he'd taste her again. He *needed* to taste her again. However, he wasn't able to put as much into words. All that came out was a definitively ineloquent, “Huh?”

Ava nodded shakily. “Okay, you're with me.” And before he could dip his head to seize her again, she'd shoved him to the ground. Then she was gone, flipping in a furious bout of acrobatics toward the all but forgotten demon.

And suddenly the mist around his head cleared, and he understood. “Ava!” If she heard, she gave no indication. Her beautiful body threw itself into battle. She was poetry in full form—poetry in motion. Poetry in every conceivable embodiment.

But then he'd always thought so.

Dante's attention fell upon the collection box, the burn in his stomach rekindling. It wasn't nearly as potent as before, but there nonetheless. In a flash he found himself transformed again into the pun of a bad voodoo gig, unseen hands dragging him uselessly toward Mammon's shiny toy. “Oh, not good,” he decided, voice tinged with panic, fingers scratching at the earth. “Not good!”

“Oh, no you don't!” Ava snapped, a fiery bolt of electricity spawning from her palm and tackling the demon's throat. He didn't even have time to look impressed before she whirled and pinned him under a fierce glare. “Damn it, Dante!”

“Help me!”

Ava materialized just as his toes threatened to skim the box's surface, smashing her leg into its side and sending the thing flying across the night sky. It twisted and spiraled before crashing at the manor's front steps.

Mammon snarled something dangerous.

“Well,” Ava said, wiping her hands. “Enough with the parlor tricks, asshole. If you want to talk, then talk. Leave my vampire alone.”

Dante's chest warmed. *Her vampire?*

The demon gargled something else—something Dante suspected might be words in some distant tongue. Whatever it was it sounded like gibberish to him.

Ava didn't have the same trouble. Instead, her eyebrows perked and she snorted once the gabble stopped. “Obviously, you were wrong. Now why don't you make like a good little demon and get the hell outta here before I add Murder One to my rap sheet?”

Dante climbed to his feet. “What's going on here?” It was a stage whisper at best.

“My old friend here decided to take me for a test run,” she replied, her glare not budging off the demon. “See if Lucifer has unplugged me yet.”

“Lucifer can do that?”

“He’s the Prince of Lies, brainiac. What the hell do you think?”

“And he hasn’t, right? Turned off your power, that is. We won?”

Ava’s lips twitched. “Yeah, Dante, we won.”

He beamed at the demon then, bravado back in force. “Yeah,” he said. “You hear that, shitface? We kicked your ass.”

Ava snickered softly. “You better get going before Lucifer finds out where you’ve been,” she advised the demon. “Obviously, if he hasn’t deactivated me, he’s not ready to hand it over to you.”

Mammon’s head reeled and he spat something Dante didn’t need translated. For her part, Ava barely batted an eyelash. “Yeah,” she said. “Like you’re the first guy to pull that line.”

Whether or not the demon answered her with a disgusted growl or an impolite gesture, Dante would never know. The next second, Mammon had reclaimed his collection box and all but faded into the night. It was something unlike anything he’d ever seen in the real world. The demons he typically encountered were less with the theatrics and more loudmouths who found themselves on the business end of a hunter’s knife. Those demons with actual power—the shit-storm this asshole had raised, for instance—tended to apply their focus elsewhere. The full shimmer in and out was something Dante had previously consigned as Hollywood theatrics, and had he not witnessed it fully, he would never have believed it possible.

“Someday,” he said with a deep breath. “You’re gonna have to explain what happened here.”

Ava shrugged, seemingly unmoved. She stared at the place Mammon had disappeared for a beat or so before turning on her heel as though what had happened here was another day at the office. “Gladly,” she said. “Just not now.”

“What?”

“Demon’s gone, and now I can sleep.”

“Sleep?” The word sounded strange to him.

“Yeah. Mammon used his energy signature to pull me here, ergo no sleep, ergo useless trip into the country just to show him I can still kick his ass.”

“So you’re just gonna...”

“Walk back to the hotel and crawl into bed.”

“And sleep.”

“That’s the idea. To sleep, perchance *not* to dream.” Her gaze drifted, not that Dante was particularly interested in her eyes at the moment—not with her mouth begging silently for his own, and certainly not with the deliciously steady rise and fall of her breasts tempting his aching empty hands. Was she going to pretend the kiss hadn’t happened?

“Yeah,” Ava muttered more to herself. She shook her head. “Like I’ll get away with that.”

“Damn right you won’t.”

She looked at him askance. “With not dreaming?”

“No, with pretending it never happened.”

“What never happened?”

Her voice reflected genuine confusion, which only fed into his irritation. *No*, Dante avowed. No, she would not forget. He wouldn’t let her. She could fight him if she wished,

but he wouldn't let her pretend it hadn't happened. Regardless of her intentions, he knew she'd felt something. No girl moaned like she'd moaned without feeling... Well, he didn't know what, but he was sure as hell going to find out. Without waiting another beat, he cupped her cheeks and drew her mouth to his, slipping his tongue between her lips with no regard to invitation.

*Ava.*

She tasted so sweet. Tense like before, but only at first. Only until passion overwhelmed her better senses, only until she conceded. Then she battled him all over again. Whimpering, clawing, nipping, sucking, drawing him into her mouth to stake her claim on his tongue, his lips—fuck, if she wasn't careful, he'd shove her to the ground and spread her legs apart. The molten heat of her pussy was going to melt his jeans, anyway, for the way she gyrated her hips against him. She would split him apart if he wasn't careful, and he couldn't give a fuck.

Her kisses were starved. She would consume him if he let her.

And he would let her.

A gasp drove their lips apart, Ava's head rolling back, and his lips eagerly accepted the invitation. He pressed hot, wet kisses down her throat, slipping his hands—which had at some point traveled from her cheeks to her waist—farther southward until he had her ass cradled in his hands. “Christ,” Dante breathed against her throat, rubbing his erection against her center with shameless abandon. He wanted her to feel him—feel exactly to what she'd driven him. Feel how desperate he was to be inside. “My ... *Ava...*”

“Wha...”

“So hot. Taste so good.”

“Dante...”

“Wanna feel you, sweetheart. And I know you want to feel me too.” There was no account for what happened. One second he swam in Ava's arousal, and the next he was on his back, woefully unaccompanied by the woman in question. It took a few beats to register what had occurred, and another to realize the only person around to have shoved him to the ground was the girl standing before him. The girl whose cheeks were flushed, whose lips were swollen, and whose eyes were dark with lust she couldn't hope to hide. “What?” he demanded, sitting up. “Ava?”

Ava's gaze was occupied avoiding his. Twice she glanced to the bulge pressing his jeans and twice she looked away, scandalized. She shivered and wrapped her arms around herself. “I ... ummm...”

“You what?”

“That was ... weird.”

“I like weird,” he retorted, climbing to his feet. “Weird is good.”

“I didn't mean to kiss you earlier.”

Dante scowled. “What? Your mouth just accidentally fell on mine?”

“I was trying to get your attention.”

“Yeah, and you managed fine.”

“It was either that or you became one of Mammon's pet vampires.” Ava crossed her arms, finally gaining back some of that righteous indignation that made her so cute. “What would you have had me do?”

His hands came up. “Make no mistake, I loved kissing you. I just don't understand why we can't do it again.”

“Because ... we’re ... we don’t...” Confusion flooded her face. “We can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Do I really have to go into it?” She held up a hand and shook her head before he could retort. “No. I don’t. Dante...” A long pause, filled only with the sound of her heavy breaths. “You should leave.”

“Too tempting for you?”

“No, I mean town.” Ava waved emphatically toward the all but forgotten home. The one the sign had named Longbourne. “You saw what happened. If Mammon finds you when I’m not around—”

“Not seeing a problem. I’ll just stick close to you.”

“But even then there’s no guarantee I’ll be able to stop you from crawling in the box yourself.”

Dante shrugged. “Just do what you did tonight. We should be fine.”

She just stared at him. “Do you have some massive death wish I should know about?”

“Kinda redundant asking that of a guy who’s already dead,” he observed. “I told you I wanted to help.”

“And then you changed your mind.”

“When?”

“Just before Mammon started working his mojo on you!”

“Yeah, well, I changed my mind again right around the time you mauled me with your lips.”

“You’re reading way too much into one little kiss, Dante.”

“There was nothing little about that kiss,” Dante retorted, hooking his thumbs through his belt loops. “And you’re off count.”

Ava sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. “I’m not going to stand here and argue with you,” she said, hesitated, then broke for the path they’d walked together. “If you know what’s good for you, you’ll take this night as a massive hint and leave now.”

“Yeah, well, not one for doing what I’m told.”

“You’re also not known for your smarts. Strange how these things tend to go hand-in-hand.”

She turned away, seemingly aware her voice lacked conviction. She betrayed so much in one little gesture. Without being any the wiser, her desperate confusion was on full display. Christ, he’d really rattled her.

“I’m going back to my room,” Ava announced, visibly trying to convince herself. Another beat, she hesitated as though struggling to find words, but gave up in a matter of seconds for the more tempting escape of the wooded path.

Leaving Dante to do nothing but watch the rhythmic sway of her hips until she melted into shadows.

\* \* \* \*

“I’m a moron,” Ava muttered irritably, ripping the comforter down the bed. “Kiss the dangerously sexy vampire to distract him from certain doom. Why, yes, that does seem to be the only option.”

God, he’d tasted good. Nothing like the few fantasies she’d allowed herself, and definitely nothing like any of the kisses she’d shared with Sebastian. Dante’s mouth



wasn't overly remarkable by any means, but the way he'd touched her—the way his lips had molded against hers—the way he'd flaunted his reaction to her. She hadn't dreamed of giving thought to sex again so soon—or at all—but here she was. Thinking about it.

Really thinking about it.

Sebastian had left her with one hell of a lesson. Men were scum. A little cliché, yes, and definitely on the nose, but if a fricken angel couldn't keep his word, what the hell chance did a manwhore like Dante have? Everything was way too fucked up right now to throw a fling into the mix.

Still, Sebastian's kisses had never made her burn. Not once, yet she couldn't stop sizzling from the simple thought of what she had shared with Dante tonight. Perhaps it was the thrill of the forbidden. Perhaps it was knowing exactly how wrong it was. How wrong *Dante* was.

The night had at least been somewhat productive, aside from the idiocy that had been throwing herself at the one man she could never invite into bed. She'd seen Mammon and learned, despite how much she'd screwed things up as of late, her superpowers remained untouched. She'd fought a hell-demon and kicked his ass upward and downward, if she didn't say so herself.

No thanks to Dante.

*Dante.* Ava sighed. Her mind had turned against her. She needed the tantalizingly delicious image of them writhing together out of her mind. She needed to actually attempt a hand at sleep, no matter how elusive. She needed to brave the chance of dreams.

God, she really needed to stop, else she'd start cursing at the top of her lungs. Though her room offered privacy, she doubted the walls were soundproof. Thus, instead of screaming, Ava changed into her favorite oversized T-shirt and slipped her legs under the blankets. Better to sleep it off and hope for Dante-less dreams.

One could hope.

\* \* \* \*

A metallic crash rendered her instantly awake. Ava bolted upward with a gasp, wide eyes searching the dark room as memories fought through the sleep-addled haze to remind her where she was and for what purpose.

It took a few seconds, but everything came surging back with brilliance she was too tired to consider. Bits, pieces, then the whole puzzle. She wasn't home, she was in Natchez, Mississippi, and she was on the run from everything she'd known.

Then she remembered where she'd been tonight, and what had happened.

Luxi. The Binsfeld Brigade. Mammon.

Dante.

Kissing Dante. Kissing Dante *a lot*.

*No, no, no.*

Thankfully, another noisy clamor chased away Dante-driven thoughts. Ava tossed the covers aside and made her way toward the door. She had no idea what to expect at this hour—Earth was much harder to navigate than Hell. In Hell, at least she knew what to expect. Natchez was a demonically sleepy town with little-to-no activity marring its past. Nothing that could be attributed to causes from her line of work, anyway.

Not until she came to town.

Ava inhaled deeply and dragged herself out of bed. Noises she could brush off, but not with the night she'd had ... or the threat of nights to come. Therefore, she was prepared for anything when she threw the door open.

Except there was nothing on the other side.

A large weight rolled off her shoulders in the form of a sigh. *Pathetic*. "Okay, enough excitement." She turned around to her empty room. "Back to sleep for a certain Sin."

"Sounds like a plan."

Ava tensed and whirled around again, this time clashing with a familiar crystal gaze with a smirk to match its sparkle. Though she wasn't surprised, her fist balled and swung on instinct, only to be captured in Dante's all-too-firm grip.

"Touchy, are we?"

"Force of habit," Ava explained hurriedly, jerking away. "And what the hell are you doing here?"

Dante shrugged, rocking slightly on his heels. "Hiding."

"Hiding?"

"Figure this Mammon fella's on my tail now, and there's no safer place than with you."

"Your logic is not logical."

"I've been told that a time or two."

"I told you to get out of town."

"Yeah, well, I decided to come here instead."

Ava blinked dumbly. "Are you *out* of your mind? You can't stay here!"

"Why not?"

"Because ... this is my room, Dante!"

His eyebrows flickered and his tongue massaged his teeth. "One of its more attractive qualities."

"You can't be serious." She shook her head hard. "This is ... you *can't* be serious."

"As a heart attack," Dante replied. "Been giving it a lot of thought, and we both know I'm going nowhere so long as you're in town. And I stand by what I said earlier ... I can help you."

"If by help you mean becoming a vamp-magnet the second any higher demon is in view. Yeah. Great idea."

"We'll work around it."

Ava laughed harshly. "Dante—"

"Sweetheart," he drawled, leaning against the doorframe. "You know you don't want me to go. You *want* to want me to go, but you like having me around. My being here makes you not alone. And I know you liked kissing me earlier." He licked his lips before making eye contact. "I liked it too. Can't stop thinking about it. How you taste..."

Ava took a large, exaggerated step back. "There will be no more ... that."

Dante shrugged. "Fine."

"None at all."

"Whatever you say."

"And you sleep on the floor."

A childlike grin spread across his delicious lips. His lips, which she *so* did not favor with a longing, perhaps drool-included stare. "So I get to stay?"

*This is the worst of all bad ideas.* “On the floor,” she said, barely hearing herself.  
“Do I need to invite you in?”

Dante’s grin broadened as he stepped proudly across the threshold. “You’re not human. Those rules don’t apply.”

“If you try anything—”

“I know better than that.”

“Obviously not.”

“Fair enough.” His gaze fell to her lips before landing on her breasts. “But what a way to go.”

Oh yeah. If her thundering heart wasn’t indicator enough, the sudden need to press her thighs together definitely drove the *this is insane* nail to bed.

So she was insane.

Ava looked back at Dante, warming under his smile.

She could deal with insane.

## Chapter Six

Once asleep, there was very little in the world that could stir Dante to consciousness. A side effect of having too much energy, perhaps, but a fairly predictable trait to anyone who knew him well. Periods between sleep were filled with violence, destruction and fucking—it only followed through that his crash into sleep was full and deep.

Therefore, Dante found it rather surprising when the twinge of Ava's bedsprings had him instantly alert. She started after waking, her breathing rushed and her head jerking as though determining she'd truly slept uninterrupted. He smothered a grin, knowing she'd anticipated awaking with either two puncture wounds in her throat or a vampire cuddled up behind her. Both ideas were tempting, but the greater pleasure was in the wait. The suspense. The hunt.

Ava would be his. This was now certain, upgraded from the realm of fantasy to a place where dreams became tangible. Ava would be his ... if only for a little while. If only until the spell around their extremely special circumstances shattered and shoved them back into the reality they were both desperate to escape. Before they parted ways, he would know how her pussy tasted. He would know just how snugly she fit around his cock. He would know the delicious little sounds she made—whether or not she was a screamer. He would know her.

Yet it wouldn't be enough. He wanted more. He *needed* more, which was why a fling wouldn't satisfy him. Still, it seemed too ridiculous, too impossible, too impulsive, to give his feelings for Ava any declaration.

But then Ava had been with him for centuries now. She'd been with him since she pried the righteous holy man off his tattered body—ever since he witnessed the gritty look of determination on her beautiful, haunted face. These circumstances only enhanced what he knew was true. Something he might have known for years but only now fully realized.

*I love her.*

The thought originated from nowhere, unbidden and unwanted. The second it tickled the recesses of his mind, his inner defenses rebelled and shoved it back. Love was something of which he wanted no part. He cared for her, sure, and pined after her like a heartsick fool, but love assigned him sentiment he didn't want and feelings he couldn't have. Not for Ava, at the very least—the one woman beyond his reach. He might touch her, kiss her and feel her body against his, but he would never know the warmth of her smile. She would never allow him that close, and he wasn't pathetic enough to chase after an ideal.

No, he couldn't love her. He wouldn't let himself.

Except he already did.

Dante bit back a groan, somehow resisting the urge to slam his head against the floor. The fucking nerve. He should have seen this coming—should have read the warning signs and stayed the hell away from her when he had the chance. Love was messy and complicated and he'd avoided it for centuries, watching from afar as lives fell into ruin for the want of something few ever touched. Love drove people apart and demolished everything in its path. Love made fools of scholars. Love turned rationality

into chaos. Love prompted desecration and despair. Love inspired devastation, and Dante had known enough pain without welcoming more.

Loving Ava would destroy him, for no matter how sane he was he knew he would unmake himself for the want of her. Touching her wouldn't be enough. He'd need it all, and he would never get it. Ava had only let one person touch her, and had learned the dark side of love as assuredly as everyone else. She wouldn't be so foolish again, and she certainly wouldn't give herself to a demon.

Not to him.

Dante squeezed his eyes shut. He didn't want to love her. He wanted to feel her around his cock, sure, and enjoy her companionship as a lover might, but he didn't want to love her.

But he did. He had forever. He'd simply never given it a name. *Damn, damn, damn, damn.*

Strange revelations to have while sleeping on Ava's rented floor, but that didn't make them any less true. And he knew he'd have her. He'd have the pleasure of her body. He'd know the taste of her blood.

Yesterday it would have been enough, but yesterday he hadn't known he loved her. Today he wanted forever.

Another telling whine of the bedsprings silenced his thoughts completely. The soft pads of her feet brushed carpeted floor as she leaned over him, her soft, delicate scent overwhelming his senses. How a woman so strong could smell so sweet, he didn't know, but he wanted to fill his lungs with it.

"Dante?" Her hand brushed his shoulder. "Dante?" she whispered again, squeezing him softly. When he failed to stir again, she sighed and drew back. "All right. I'm—ummm ... going to shower." Ava took another step back. "And, on the off chance you can hear me, if you do so much as sniff my panties, it's the dust-buster for you."

Dante killed a grin. She was too damn cute for her own good. Not that the idea of peeping at her naked glory wasn't tempting—fuck, it was too tempting for words. The visual alone had his cock twitching. And though he wasn't one to follow a moral code, he would respect her privacy. For now.

Tomorrow might be a whole new ballgame.

His conviction to remain a gentleman didn't make the shower any more endurable. The entire time the water ran, images of a naked Ava assaulted his sex-starved mind. Ava dripping. Ava soaping. Ava's beautiful breasts flecked with drops of water. Ava's bare pussy aching to be touched. Her soft skin. Her firm body. Her legs wrapped around his waist as he fingered her clit and readied her, pressed her against the wall and pried her vaginal lips apart with his cock.

Fuck, his imagination really hated him.

A roll of steam announced her return to the main room, soft, cautious steps crossing the floor. When he stole a peek, he saw she wore the over-sized T-shirt in which she'd greeted him the night before, only this time lacking a panty line whenever the smooth cotton pressed against her bare thigh.

He swallowed. Hard. *Fucking hard, that's right.*

She'd wrapped her hair in a towel by means he was certain only women knew how to perform. She hesitated, turned her head in his direction, but ultimately decided to leave him alone and instead rummaged through the night bag sitting by her bed.

God, he felt so aware of her. Every hot little breath she took echoed in his lungs.

Ava murmured unintelligibly and held something up. The bed blocked most of the view, but he saw enough to know she appraised some slinky outfit. For what end, he could only guess.

Fuck pretenses. He'd never been the strong silent type. "Not exactly discreet," Dante muttered.

Ava didn't even turn around. "I knew you weren't asleep."

"What time is it?"

"Sun sets in a couple hours. You don't think I'd look good in lace?"

"Sweetheart, I think you'd look good in sackcloth."

She snickered. "You're just saying that to get me into bed."

"Where's the trust?" He grinned and stretched his arms. Admittedly, a hotel room floor wasn't exactly his idea of posh, but it wasn't the worst place to sleep, especially given the company to which he awoke. "We got plans tonight? Demons to track down? Graveyards to haunt?"

She hesitated. "Something like that. I've decided to perform a summoning ritual." A pause. "For Sebastian."

Dante's eyes opened wide as the rest of him froze. "What?" Immobility only lasted a second—he flew upward, nearly tearing up the floor in an effort to get to his feet. "Are you outta your head?"

Ava sighed, flinging her lacy garment onto the bed. Her expression was set, determined, and though he knew better than to fight with her, he couldn't help the anger swelling in his chest any more than he could the resentful beast that came with it. Despite whatever she'd said regarding her angel, despite whatever Dante had told himself to quell his jealousy, despite whatever logic warned, the bastard had been there first. Sebastian had seen, touched, tasted, kissed, felt and experienced something that belonged to Dante. Moreover, he'd hung her out to dry. The winged bastard didn't deserve Ava's thoughts or concern, much less to share her space.

"I'm not out of my head," Ava said softly. "And I'm not doing this to beg him to take me back or anything even remotely like that. He might be able to help." Dante snickered, but didn't say anything. "And, yeah, I kinda doubt Lucifer would listen to him, but it seems reasonable to go to him and ask for help, seeing as it's his stupid fault I'm in this mess."

"The guy left you a fucking Dear Jane letter."

"I know. I was there for that."

"Then why the hell do you think he'll go up against *Lucifer* if he wasn't man enough to end things with you face-to-face?"

Ava's hands came up. "Look, I'm not expecting miracles, but I can't just sit around on my ass waiting for the sky to fall, okay? Running into Mammon last night was a good thing. My powers are still charged, which means Lucifer hasn't given up on me yet. And if the Lower Six are trying to boost me out of a job, I need to fight for it. Luxi didn't give any indication as to when any of this was going down, but damn it, Dante, I can't just *sit here* and wait." She sighed angrily and turned away, shaking her head. "Sebastian's pretty much my least favorite person in the universe, but he's still ... shit, he was something to me just last week. Maybe that didn't mean much, but it should mean I get to call in a favor and ask him to grow a pair."

Dante swallowed hard, his eyes unblinking. "Fine. Fine. But I go with you."

"No."

"The fuck you mean, no?"

"I mean last night was also a big wake-up call when it comes to you."

He arched an eyebrow. "Those kisses get to you?"

"Not the kisses," Ava snapped, though her cheeks brightened a bit and she looked from corner to corner in an obvious effort to avoid his gaze. "You became Mammon's personal marionette."

He shrugged. "So? You fixed me."

"I can't just kiss you every time you're under the influence."

"Why not? It worked." He wet his lips. "And we both know you loved it."

"That's not the point."

Dante smirked. "So you *did* love it."

Ava balled her shaking hands into fists, her body wound and frustrated, her gaze clashing with his once more. She looked beautiful. Angry, worked up and beautiful. "I'm not having this discussion with you now," she said. "Or, you know, ever. But I'm also not going to let some hell-demon add you to his collection box just because you're dumb enough to follow me everywhere. That's not how this works."

"Then how does it work?"

"It works with you realizing you're in way over your head and leaving the state."

"You keep saying that, but we both know it won't happen. Try singing me a different tune this time." He huffed and rounded the bed. "You're stuck with me."

"In every sense of the word," she muttered.

"And if I'm such an inconvenience, why *don't* you want me making some demon's treasure chest? It'd get me outta your hair, wouldn't it?" Dante crossed his arms and rose on his heels in challenge. "I think you know how much you'd miss me."

She snorted, though she looked away again. "Hardly."

"You can't keep running from this."

"From what? You?" Ava shook her head with a dry laugh. "Get over yourself. Just because I don't want you sucked into a box doesn't mean shit. You have any idea what it's like? These guys aren't your average bear."

"Yeah," Dante replied dryly. "I got that with the losing control of my body thing."

Ava snickered again. "No, you really didn't. You have no idea how they can use that power. They collect earthbound demons like fucking box turtles. You'd become his pet, you understand? And then during some major disaster—Katrina or Haiti or something of the like—all the hell-demons rush to the surface and set their animals loose. But you're not free. Oh no, you're tied to your owner until he proclaims you free or, more likely, trades with another hell-demon to get a better model. You don't want that existence. I've seen what happens to others, and just because I want to keep you from doing something stupid and getting yourself chained to a hell-demon doesn't mean anything other than I have a heart and a conscience and don't like seeing anyone—even annoying shithead vampires like you—in that kinda situation."

Her irises flashed and her chest heaved. Dark red strands of hair escaped the towel wrapped around her head. The air around them felt heavy and thick, and despite the indignation in her beautiful eyes, despite the palpable anger rolling off her small shoulders, despite everything, he wanted her like he'd never wanted her before. And he

knew he wasn't alone—vampire senses never lied. The warmth of her arousal was ecstasy for the weary soul. Her lips parted. Anger accented her excitement. "Ava..."

"Sun doesn't set for another couple hours," she said, breaking away with a deep breath. "I need to find a place to do this thing."

"What?"

"The ritual summoning. I need to ... get dressed." She seized the forgotten garments off the bed, practically sprinting toward the bathroom and slamming the door shut behind her.

Dante's attention remained fixated on the closed wooden panel for a long second before he broke away, heaving a large sigh and running both hands through his hair. The woman would be the death of him. One thing was for certain: if she thought he would sit idly by while she went out and chatted up her former lover, she had a thing or two to learn about vampires.

Or, at the very least, this one.

\* \* \* \*

Wow. She really hadn't seen that coming.

Almost twenty-four hours had passed since her stroll around the Natchez cemetery, and somehow her life had managed to take the twisted knot it had become and roll itself into something she doubted she could ever unwind. Ava's mind refused her any peace. Instead, she found herself replaying Dante's hurt expression and the jealousy he tried so richly to hide whenever Sebastian entered a conversation. At first, she thought it macho pettiness, but for the way Dante refused to leave her be, she had entertained the notion that something deeper underlay his suggestive looks and innuendos. Something she hadn't seen, or hadn't known to see.

Her lips still burned from his kiss—burned in a way they had never burned before. Knowing he slept just feet from her bed had been as close to the receiving end of torture as she intended to get. And despite the huff she'd stormed out in, the simple fact remained she liked his attentiveness and concern. She liked knowing he would be waiting when she got back. She liked having him around, no matter how dangerous it was.

Ava sighed heavily, turning a corner onto one of Natchez's busier streets. The sun was nestled behind a grove of trees, masked by a curtain of Spanish moss, and the air smelled fresh and springy. She deeply appreciated the scene, undisturbed by the zoom of cars or the blare of rap music from various stereos. Rush hour had no affect on the ambiance, and despite her admitted preference for larger cities, Ava felt under different circumstances, she would love the small-town hominess and the warmth of Southern tranquility.

Yet she had to outrun her storm clouds. Summoning Sebastian might be the mother of bad ideas, but sitting around and waiting for others to decide her fate appealed to her far less. It would likewise go a long way in obtaining closure.

She could tell the asshole exactly what she thought of him.

Then there was Dante. *Dante*. Ava sighed again, balancing herself along the road's curb and kicking a clump of grass with her right foot. The advantage to having a severely sun-allergic traveling companion—though when Dante had become a traveling companion, she didn't know—was the brief time provided for introspection. How within the time-span of twenty-four hours, he'd gone from a pain-in-the-ass to the vampire



crowding the floor of her rented room. The vampire who suddenly embodied *forbidden fruit* in every delicious sense. The vampire whose kisses sparked a fire deep within her belly—stronger than any she'd ever before felt, and more terrifying for that very reason. The vampire with whom she desperately wanted more time, if only to discover in which direction their relationship had headed.

The vampire she couldn't touch the way she wanted. Not without conceding something she'd needed to believe, no matter the futility.

*This will end badly.* That was almost certain. *It's wrong.*

That one lent her pause. Admittedly, the irony was not lost on her—going from stripping her panties for an angel to porny thoughts about a demon. Sure, she was a thing from Hell, but she still had standards, and she was damned tired of being mistaken for sin when sin was, in fact, only her job. Her origin had nothing to do with who she was, just for what purpose she was created, and her impossibly high standards had kept her chaste and proud for centuries. That didn't change the fact, though, that as wrong as Dante might be for her, he didn't feel wrong. There was no *wrong*, there was only this desperate want of something she didn't wish to name.

*Therein lies a world of hurt.* And hurt was something she very much wanted to avoid. One heartache had nearly destroyed her; another would finish the job. So she couldn't travel that road with Dante. No matter how much she desired it, she couldn't. End of story. Next question.

*Could try to at least sound convinced,* Ava thought grumpily. *This is my mind, after all.*

Yet her mind wasn't hers now, and it hadn't been for a while. Her mind seemed content to railroad itself into lousy situations, though she supposed her heart deserved a fair share of the blame. After all, she'd gone so long without exploring what sensations it could invoke it seemed rational it would rebel first chance it received. She'd allowed herself to fall for an angel, and her mind wasn't prepared for the clean-up. Her mind wasn't prepared for anything her heart threw its way. Perhaps her focus on Dante was a result of not knowing how to respond to the shit-storm her life had become.

Or perhaps Dante meant more to her than she wanted to confess. The thought made her chest contract. Dante was the epitome of danger. He was loud, crude, overtly sexual and—*He refuses to leave.*

Ava froze midstride.

Dante refused to leave. Mammon could have sucked him into his bag of goodies last night, and he hadn't blinked. He'd been reasonable enough to express his fear, of course, but he still hadn't done what she kept encouraging him to do. He hadn't turned tail and fled. Not last night during the encounter, and not after learning what she was. He knew she answered to Lucifer himself and it hadn't convinced him he might be in over his head. Dante pointedly refused to leave. He wanted to accompany her no matter the dangers posed. He wanted to be at her side.

Ava's fingers went numb, her stomach tightening and the pain in her chest expanding with the thrill of danger and excitement of the unknown. Dante was Dante's biggest fan, therefore self-preservation had almost assuredly kicked in at least once. Yet here he remained. He wouldn't leave her alone. He wouldn't let her face anything by herself. He wanted to be there.

He demanded the right of being there.

“Unholy fuck,” Ava muttered.

She looked up, needing to refocus, and almost immediately spied what she’d come out to find. It sat through a grove of trees, a building of red brick and white plaster, marred with the telling sign of fire burns.

One thing at a time. She’d summon Sebastian tonight and see if her worthless ex could come up anything helpful. Ava couldn’t be expected to wade through the confusion of the moment, the uncertainty of the future and the bewildering reality of Dante’s insane loyalty all at once.

Right now, she’d focus on what came next. If nothing else, it would help keep her from losing her mind.

\* \* \* \*

Ava wasn’t surprised to find Dante pacing when she returned to the room. He’d been cooped inside as she scoped the town, and she knew she wasn’t imagining the relief that melted from concern when his head whipped up. He’d been worried about her. Worried. Another confusing emotion, one she never would have associated with him. Not before today.

“You were supposed to be back thirty minutes ago,” he snapped.

She shrugged. “I’m back now.”

“Yeah? Your inner Sindar go off, or did you just—”

Ava smiled and held up a small plastic sack. “Went shopping.”

Dante’s frown remained in place until a sniff confirmed what she’d brought home. Then his eyes changed, fierceness fading to a soft shimmer, fortified with awe and gratitude. He glanced from the bag to her face and back again before stepping forward, a small, almost shy smile tickling his perfect lips. “You brought me blood?” he asked gently, reaching for her offering.

“Well...” She shuffled awkwardly. There had been no way to predict his reaction, but his tender appreciation had her moved beyond reproach. “You mentioned you hadn’t had any, and since we’re practically in a barnyard, it wasn’t hard to find a butcher shop.”

Dante inspected the contents. “It’s pig’s?”

“Yes.”

“Thing of Hell and you can’t even bring me a human?”

“That’s disgusting,” she retorted. “I’ve seen some horrific things, but I’ll never get the appeal of blood or eating it or ... well, any of that. And I’m not into making human sacrifices. Sorry.”

He snickered. “What kind of Sin are you?”

“The normal kind. People really have Hell pegged as something it’s not, you know.”

“Imagine that.”

Ava shrugged. “Well, take it or leave it, pig’s blood or not. You didn’t expect me to lift it from a hospital, did you?”

“Would’ve been quite a gesture, sweetheart,” he replied, favoring her with a rakish grin.

“I think bringing you blood in the first place is gesture enough.” She exhaled deeply, relieved at his teasing. Teasing she could handle. Teasing felt normal. The tender look on his face demanded serious reflection, and she was all used up on her daily quantity of deep thoughts. “I found where to go.”

Dante's grin faded. "For this summoning?"

"Yeah."

"Good. I was beside myself with worry." His fangs descended and tore into the first of five plastic blood-filled bags. And to her horror, the look on his face did nothing to disgust her. Rather, every nerve in her body was suddenly ablaze and electric sparks shot directly to her clit. God, she was *so* screwed. If Dante consuming blood turned her on there was little hope in salvaging her heart from this escapade.

*Guh.* "I ... uhhh ... well." Ava quickly glanced away. "I need to change."

"Lace not good enough for your angel?"

"Actually, I'd prefer jeans and a T-shirt. Make that a parka. I don't want him to think this is a 'I want you back so bad' summoning." She paused, licking her lips. "Which is why I want you with me."

That did it. Dante's head swung up, blood trickling from the side of his mouth.

"What now?"

She shifted her weight from one foot to the other. "I want you with me."

"You do?"

"Yes."

"You didn't before."

"I know. I changed my mind."

"You changed your mind."

Ava nodded. "People can do that."

Dante arched a cool eyebrow. How he managed to look so delicious with a blood-ringing around his mouth was beyond her. "This a date then?"

She swallowed hard. "A what?"

"You and me," he continued. "I figure we tell him you got something new to warm your bed. We could even fool around a bit. You know. Make sure he knows you're good and over him. Got something new. Hotter, spicier, and a lot more fun to have around."

Her cheeks warmed and her mouth went dry. Harmless flirting. She could deal with this. She could be blasé. Nothing had changed. Nothing. "You wish," she said, hoping her voice sounded as light and airy as it did in her mind. Not at all like she'd spent most of her walk around town mulling over the notion of Dante and his strange devotion to her, and how he'd proven to be more of a true man than anyone she'd ever met.

It was a lot to put into two little words, but she gave it her best. Though, at first, Ava thought she'd said something wrong. He looked at her strangely and without humor, tilting his head, the soft burn in his gaze sparking new flames, which struck chords deep she didn't know her body possessed. Then he moved forward, wiping his mouth as his fangs receded. The bag in his hands disappeared, before she could think to question him, her cheeks were cupped in his palms and he kissed her.

*God*, he kissed her. His lips flirted with her, loved her, sang wordless songs until she couldn't help but sigh against him—couldn't help but allow his tongue to wander into her mouth. He tasted wonderful—dangerous. Hints of alcohol and the metallic twang of blood tickled her taste buds. Flavor that should have repulsed her, but only made her want. He was so real. So thoroughly real. No secrets lingered in his past, nothing that would surprise her. The demon inside him was just as present as the man, not two entities but one. One rolled together, a faulted but somehow perfect package. He kissed her with desperation she'd never before tasted. As though her kisses were what granted him life.

Yes, she'd wanted this. Since last night. Since her mouth had explored his on the lawn of some Southern palace. She wanted to know him without motive. She'd kissed him before to save his life. One taste had made her an addict.

"Fuck," Dante murmured, sucking intently on her lower lip. "Yes ... I do."

Intelligibility abandoned her altogether. Ava's head fell back, every inch of her dangerously close to melting completely. "Ahhh..."

"I do," he repeated as his mouth nibbled a wet path down her throat, hands following suit. His left one found her breast without warning, palming her reverently and exciting her nipple with a few masterful strokes of his thumb. "I do wish it, Ava. Want you now. Want you open and begging for me."

"Dante..."

"I wanna spread you apart," he murmured, his wandering mouth traveling farther southward. "Wanna play with your cunt. Wanna see where you're soft."

His right hand delved between them and pressed at the apex of her thighs, which fell apart without struggle.

*Yes.*

Dante sighed. "You're so hard everywhere, aren't you?"

"You're one to talk," Ava retorted. Her own hand itched to explore the hard confines of his erection, but she remained immobile—frozen by nerves or arousal or some bizarre combination of the two. At the moment, she barely remembered her own name.

A chuckle. "Naughty girl."

"Dante, we—"

"But you are. So hard everywhere. So firm. But here..." His palm grated against her pussy. "Here you're all woman. Soft. Pink. Wet. Wanting me so bad. Don't you, Ava? Tell your Dante how bad you want him."

Words scratched at her throat. *Yes*, she wanted him now. Wanted him fiercely. Wanted him beyond knowledge of what it meant to want. What it meant to possess or be possessed. She wanted Dante everywhere. His hands in her hair, his mouth between her legs, his tongue around her nipples, his fingers strumming her clit, his cock sliding against her lips, his body against hers. She wanted it all. She wanted everything. A whirlwind of sensation had her falling until she was certain she'd crash against the floor, but when she opened her eyes she still stood.

Still on both feet.

And the world waited outside. The world with its siblings and demons and Lucifer. The world with its consequences. The world with its damned *reality*. With its truth of what she was. What he was. And what they were to each other.

From where the strength came, she did not know. One second she teetered on crashing onto the mattress, and the next she had returned to herself. She braced her hands against his shoulders and shoved. The second air hit her lungs she flew. Moving across the room in a blaze, changing clothes, burning the ground until there was nothing but the echoes of her heavy strides.

"We gotta go," Ava said, cheeks burning. She couldn't look at him. "We gotta..."

"Yeah. Got it."

His voice was devoid of emotion, as though their encounter meant nothing. But she knew better. She didn't know how, but she knew. Which was why she couldn't glance up. Resistance would melt and she wasn't ready. She wasn't ready to be hurt again. She

wasn't ready to chance it. Not now. Her heart couldn't take the risk—and risk was written all over this. All over Dante. A huge all-sales-are-final risk, and if she gave in she'd be handing herself over to a world of hurt.

It was safer to keep her distance no matter what she wanted. Thus Ava moved robotically at his side as he led her outside. Though she wished to speak, she bit her tongue. Though she wished to touch him, her hands remained steadfast at her sides. There was nothing to do but go through with the summoning and hope the night would improve.

Or better yet, change her mind.

## Chapter Seven

The silence between them would strangle a lesser man. Thankfully, he wasn't the sort of guy who depended on air.

So why was his throat so damnably tight? Why did his lungs ache with the need to breathe? His skin burned from where he'd held her. From the molten heat at her crotch to the ample softness of her breasts, the silky perfection of her mouth ... it was too much for one vamp to handle. Too much for one with no moral ties to keep him grounded—none but the want of Ava.

She was doing her best not to look at him. Dante's jaw clenched. *Perfect. Fucking perfect.* Still, there was no way he would stand for silence. Not with everything that had already transpired between them, and especially not through the ritual. "This place far from here?"

"Not too far," she replied, her voice strained.

Right. This was going to be a fun night. Dante heaved a sigh. The burn to touch her wouldn't get better. If anything, the normality of the world outside only worsened the brewing sickness in his stomach. But he'd survive. He would. If she wanted him, she'd have to be the one to say something. He'd made it clear how he felt—well, not the part where he loved her, but under the circumstances that was a matter of preserving what little pride he'd managed to not toss in the gutter. She knew enough. She knew he was hers if she wanted him.

He just wished he could tell the burn the same. It felt unbearable.

"I hope this goes quickly," Ava said softly.

Did the stupid woman not realize how fucking sultry she sounded? Was she doing it on purpose? It'd be like her to torment him just for kicks. She'd relish the sting.

No. The rational man inside warned against him. He was just irritated and suffering from the biggest case of blue balls he'd known in his life. He was also in love with someone who kept dodging him at every turn, which could throw a wrench into anyone's day. The need to touch her blazed through him with all the fire of the devil's whimsy.

"I'm sorry."

It took him a few seconds to realize the voice wasn't imagined. Dante blinked and looked at her in surprise. "What?"

Ava didn't look at him, rather her head hung bowed, her gaze steadfast on the ground. How she remained so oblivious to the power she held in the slightest gesture was beyond him. Ava was the pounding in his head and the ache in his heart. He wanted to strangle and hold her all in one stroke. So infuriating. So confusing. So fucking beautiful.

"What happened back in the room," she continued softly. A beat, then she inhaled and glanced up. "I'm sorry for that. My feelings are ... well, kinda all over the place right now. It's ... this thing we're doing is totally insane. You know that, right?"

"Kissing me, you mean?"

Ava shook her head, her hands falling to her sides. "If I kiss you ... this thing is freaking me out."

"What thing?"

"You and me. I kissed you yesterday to save your undead ass and suddenly we're ...

kissing all the time and you staying in my room and..." She broke off, again looking away. "I don't get it. I don't get how I went from just ... distracting you yesterday with a quick kiss to—"

"There was nothing quick about that kiss, sweetheart."

"Well, it was supposed to be quick before your hands became grabby."

Dante smirked. "Had a gorgeous, warm woman wiggling against me. My hands went where they wanted. Can't be held accountable."

There was a pause. "Gorgeous?" she repeated shyly, her cheeks pink.

"Come on. You know you're gorgeous."

Ava smiled and turned her head to look at him again. "Not really. I don't know it. I have good days and bad."

"Well, take it from me. I've been around a long time and I think I can identify beauty." His grin grew wicked. "So you're all in a mess about us then."

"I don't get how you're not. This is weird, isn't it? We've known each other forever and suddenly we're kissing and grabbing and having indecent thoughts—"

"Your thoughts are indecent? About me?"

She tossed him a dry glance. "Don't look so happy about it."

"You're right. I should definitely take your having indecent thoughts about me as a bad thing." Dante grinned, his heart feeling lighter. It felt nice, this crazy thing called honesty. At least she wasn't running from him at the moment. That could change on a whim, granted, but he much preferred the world wherein she took him as he was.

Perhaps that meant *actual* honesty, rather than coy smiles and insinuations. His smirk melted at the thought, awareness sinking in. He couldn't hide forever, either, if he expected her to open herself to him. His own wall needed to fall before he attempted hers. The thought terrified him, but strengthened him all the same.

At least he would have an answer, or an idea of where he truly stood. "Look, Ava," he heard himself say. The prospect of putting courage into action only furthered his discomfort, but he knew as soon as the words were out he had to follow them. It was a different ballgame now. He knew he loved her, which meant having nothing to lose and everything to gain. "If it makes any difference, this is something I've given a lot of thought."

She snorted. "Yeah. Believe me, I got it."

"Not the way you think." Dante hesitated, his skin warming as his hand brushed hers. "I came here because of you."

"I know. You told me. Luxi infected you with lust."

"Your other sister too."

"Invi?"

"Yeah. Sounds right."

Ava's pace slowed a fraction at that revelation, but recovered quickly all the same. "Not too surprising. Envy is a state that—"

"I wanted to kill him." Her voice broke off with a choked gasp. Good. That got her attention. "Fuck," Dante continued. "I still do. Thinking about him touching you. Kissing you. Learning your body the way..." He paused, balling his hands into fists. "This isn't just jealousy, Ava. This is something else. He was your first. I've known you for centuries, and *he* was your first."

"I didn't realize it was a competition."

Heat singed his insides. Dante growled and seized her wrist, pulling her to a standstill on the side of the road. “That’s not what I meant and you know it.”

Ava yanked her hand back “I do, do I? What the hell else am I supposed to believe? You stuck around the longest—”

“Now you’re putting words in my mouth.”

“—to see if I’d spread my legs for you, and even if you didn’t get there first, you’re determined to get your turn in. Is that it?”

“No, it’s not, and you *know* it’s not.”

“History has definitely not shown that.”

“I wouldn’t be here for a piece of ass,” Dante snapped. “I can get pussy anywhere I go. It’s easy for vamps, isn’t it? Just smile at some leggy thing and she’ll fall all over herself to please you.”

Ava smiled unpleasantly, placing a theatric hand over her heart. “Oh, Dante. You certainly know the way to a girl’s heart.”

“It’s never been about sex with you.”

“Pardon my skepticism. And here I was about to believe you might have a decent bone in your warped body.” She snorted and shook her head, her legs breaking into a fast pace down the street. “God, I’m such a moron.”

He took off without realizing he’d moved at all. “Ava!”

“Just when I start to think you might actually be someone I can count on—”

“I am!” Dante barked, slowing once he was at her side again. “Fucking hell, Ava, let me in.”

“When your presentation was so convincing? Don’t think so.”

“You’re just hearing what you wanna hear. You’re scared, honey. You saw what happens—”

Her eyes narrowed. “And you’re dying to take a peek yourself.”

“It should’ve been me, goddamn it!” Dante didn’t realize he’d shouted until the echo died. His chest heaved and his body ached, and he continued on before he could give his words any thought. “Not because of you or how long I’ve known you. Not because of some bullshitting contest for your maidenhood. Not because I deserve it for putting up with you, because fuck knows I do. But more than that, more than anything, it should’ve been me because it would’ve meant something. To you. To me. To the both of us.”

They had stopped walking again. Ava’s eyes were wider than ever, and her expression was set, grim and skeptical, but she hadn’t hit him yet, so he took that as a good sign. At any rate, it encouraged him to continue. “I’ve wanted you since the moment I saw you,” Dante said heavily. “Since the first fucking day. And I could’ve had you if I wanted.”

“Bullshit.” Still she didn’t move. She just stared.

“Maybe not immediately, but if I’d tried? Honey, even you would’ve swooned.” He let loose an empty laugh and shook his head. “I didn’t want it like that, though. I didn’t want you to be a quick fuck and have it over with. I wanted you to want me the same way. I wanted you to see me as I saw you. So I waited. You didn’t let me in, but you didn’t shove me away, either. You kept coming to me. A friend, a confidant, a punching bag, whatever the case was, I was always on your short list. And yeah, maybe a quick roll in the sack would’ve been enough, once. But since the first day—our first day—I’ve wanted you in my life. I’ve always wanted more.”



Her body remained rigid even as her expression softened. Then he saw it—the flicker of recognition, the acceptance of what she couldn't fully understand. A shuddering breath trembled off her lips. She blinked once, twice, then again looked away. "I don't get it," she said softly.

"I don't fully get it myself."

"You've ... you've never given me any indication."

Dante snorted at that. "Not much one for sacrificing pride. Neither one of us are. Even so, sweetheart, that's bull."

"You're all innuendo all the time. How am I supposed to read beyond that?" Ava shook her head. "I've thought about it too, you know. You and me. And every time I thought about it, I thought about how you're so cocky and full of yourself and how you'd lord it over me, and I just didn't have it in me to give someone something that personal and intimate only to regret it later."

"I'd never—"

"Yeah, yeah. You'd never. Still I can't at all imagine where I'd get a crazy idea like that, can you?"

Dante's insides tightened defensively, but even as his mind flooded with objection, he knew fighting was a futile effort. The wall had always been up around her—always. She'd never let him in and he damned sure hadn't opened the door for her. Perhaps that was a failing on his part, though he hardly felt she could shoulder him with all the blame.

How was he supposed to know how to react when he'd never felt love before? Fuck, he'd only known it was love for a few hours now. Even still, the years leading up to this moment hadn't allotted many windows of demonstration. No one had taught him how to be anything but a vampire. His human life had come with arranged marriages, honor, duty and a shitload he'd sworn to forget. Love was a luxury sacrificed for the sake of propriety. He hadn't known it existed in reality, and he certainly hadn't known it felt like this.

"All right," Dante said, his shoulders drooping.

"All right?"

"I've never been upfront. Never knew how, in all honesty." He offered a half-smile. "Ava, you're the only woman who's been in my life for any amount of time. The others I know just want sex and blood or to destroy something for kicks. I don't play with my food, either. I take what I need, give them what they want, spin them around and send them on their way. I never learned how to do this with someone who ... someone like you."

Ava fidgeted, crossing and uncrossing her arms. Her discomfort set him at ease, placing them on seemingly even ground. At least she hadn't punched his jaw or laughed in his face yet. "I'm not used to this at all," she confessed. "Not you or Sebastian or anything. Everything feels so surreal right now. Last week I was on assignment and then it was as if the real me checked out of my body for a few days and when I came back, everything had gone to shit. The more time passes, the less *me* I remember with him." She sighed and ran her hand through her rust-red hair. "I just wanted out. He was my way out."

Dante edged forward until her breasts pressed to his chest, his hand finding her cheek. The touch was soft and intimate, unlike any they had ever shared. Close and familiar, a touch between lovers. Electricity shot through his skin and his heart all but

rattled in his chest. Christ, he'd never felt so alive. "I can be your way out."

"Dante..."

"Let me be your way out."

Her face tilted and her gaze absorbed him whole.

"Ava..."

Every kiss they shared was different but in the same, wonderful way. Last night had been fueled on adrenaline and desperation. It provided a taste he'd never thought he'd get, and gifted him with courage beyond his expectations. Perhaps if she hadn't seized his cheeks and drawn his mouth to hers, things would be different. It seemed possible. After all, his willingness to break the silence between their touch-and-go relationship had only come with that prompting. Tasting Ava redefined him. It made risking things he previously wouldn't risk seem small in comparison to the reward.

This kiss was nothing at all like those they'd shared. It was tentative and slow, warm and honest. There were no agendas now. She was hesitant but welcoming, her lips parting and her tongue taking careful, curious dives into his mouth before falling willing prisoner to his own. Fuck, a woman had never tasted so good. She took all previous conceptions and threw them away, opening doors he had never before thought to explore. Ava melted into him, her hands resting on his chest, then slowly sliding upward until her fingers linked behind his neck. Soft moans scratched at her throat, and every time he thought she might pull away, she dived in for more.

*More, more, more.* Surely creatures of Hell didn't taste this good. This had to be something only Ava possessed.

How long they stood, Dante didn't know. He could happily kiss her forever and not think to look up. At last, however, their lips broke apart, her forehead resting against his, large breaths rocking through her small body. He loved the way she trembled, loved the power he felt beneath his fingers. Ava wielded strength not many understood and even more feared. Yet in his arms she felt warm and breakable, and he was at once frantic to keep her from shattering. He needed to be there to break her fall.

"Mmm."

He grinned, brushing another tender kiss across her swollen lips. "I'll say."

Ava's mouth twitched as she opened her eyes. "I don't know what to say. This ... does this feel weird to you?"

"Not in the least."

"I would kill for your confidence." She lingered in his arms another moment before pushing back. "Dante..."

"Just say you feel it too."

"Oh fuck, yes."

He grinned and she blushed. He got a Sin to blush. It definitely wasn't for the first time, but everything felt charged now in a way he couldn't have appreciated before. It wasn't a dirty joke or a lewd stare this time—it was just them.

"I just don't know what to do with it," Ava said.

"You don't have to now."

"I don't?"

Dante shook his head, nodding to the road before them. "We've got this summoning to do," he said. For whatever reason, the prospect of facing Ava's ex didn't bother him at the moment. Might have something to do with the glimmer in her eye, or the fact the air

was thick with her arousal. He had done that. He had given her that moment of escapism, and it felt pretty damn good.

“Yeah. The summoning.”

“And then we have your family to deal with.”

Ava nodded. “And the Binsfeld Brigade.”

“And whoever else decides to show up.” Dante smiled and pressed his lips to her brow. “Way I figure it you don’t have to worry with what’s going on with us right now. I just know there’s something worth having at the end of the day.” Had he known it took saying so little to bring such light to her face, he would risk dying all over again for the chance to say it sooner.

## Chapter Eight

Her feet hit the gravel drive before she saw the worn sign warding off trespassers. The home sat about a hundred yards off the closest thing Natchez had to an expressway, though Ava didn't remember the streets being this busy the night before. She kept grabbing Dante's shoulder and shoving him off the curb and into the weedy grass. A motorist wouldn't injure him, true, but she still didn't want to have to explain why a trip to the ER wasn't necessary, or have someone in a panic over their lack of insurance.

Like most demons, Ava's eyes adjusted rapidly to darkness. She saw just as well at night as she did during the day, perhaps better given the situation. Still nothing could prevent the same creepy feeling she'd endured walking up Longbourne's drive from hijacking her senses. It didn't matter that tonight's situation was completely different to last night's, wherein her feeling seemed justified. Longbourne sat a mile or so off the beaten track in the midst of a dense thicket of trees. This home, called Avonlea according to the worn historic monument post, felt much closer to civilization. Yet the sense of cold panic had her insides gripped, steadfastly refusing relief.

It also bore notable cosmetic differences. Ava hadn't had much chance to admire any of the antebellum homes for which Natchez was famous, but she definitely had felt a more regal presence the night before. Perhaps that was due to Longbourne's odd architecture—it looked like something one might find in India rather than the Old South. Avonlea, as far as she could tell, held a much more traditional façade, or had before fire had raped away its dignity. It was a great, two-story piece of history, rotted with burnt wood and crumbled plaster. A lamppost entwined with strings of ivy guarded what had once been a grand circle drive, while scorched columns held up a slanted veranda. It was a solid silhouette, cold, unfeeling, abandoned, and the solitude moved her beyond reproach.

"What is it with you and old houses?" Dante asked, glancing over his shoulder. The road was barely visible through the weeds, but the headlights of oncoming traffic kept the path from complete darkness.

Ava shrugged, barely able to explain it herself. "It's not that old. Just a couple hundred years or so."

"Old by today's standards."

She snickered. "Anything prior to 1976 is considered old by today's standards."

Dante favored her with a quick grin. "I got it. You just like the ambiance."

"I like the privacy," Ava replied. "This is a small town, and if summoning an angel is anything like summoning a demon, we're gonna want to be as far from attracting attention as possible."

He nodded to the road. "Think we were closer to the mark last night, sweetheart."

"Yeah, but that place has people who give a shit caring for it." She motioned for him to follow, then started up the rickety steps to the porch. "This place burned a long time ago."

"And if some aspiring artist comes to perfect his masterpiece?" Dante asked.

"The graffiti?" Each of the burned columns stood marred with black spray paint. Ava shook her head. "I think it's perfected enough."

“It’s inspiring.”

“It’s moronic.”

“It’s kids these days. What are we gonna do?”

“I’m not too worried about going medieval on some doped-up crackhead’s ass, and I doubt anyone who’d disturb us out here would wanna phone the cops.”

“You never know.”

Ava threw him a glance over her shoulder. The inside of the hollowed home appeared even less inviting than its exterior, but the scorch marks on the walls and the dirty, torn up floors promised an uninterrupted summoning. “You coming or what?”

Dante tilted his head. “Do you hear banjo music?”

“I’m going inside with or without you.”

He grinned. “Don’t get your panties in a bunch. I’m coming.”

A brief tour of the floor plan inside didn’t yield more results than Ava’s first cursory glance. Every room sat in the same state of depressing disrepair, some with wallpaper peeling off the walls, others with cabinets of books that had not survived the fire. Pieces of furniture popped up in odd places, and the staircase hidden in the pocket door looked too dubious for even a Sin to brave. Thus, Ava decided the main foyer, or what was once the main foyer was the best place for the summoning. It offered plenty of room, as well as a direct glimpse to the drive in case they were interrupted.

Dante shivered and crossed his arms. “So how do these things work?”

“You’ve never summoned a demon?”

“Oh, you mean those guys in Hell that would consider me their very own Chihuahua? Yeah, can’t imagine why I’d never sent them a postcard.”

“You didn’t know about the Chihuahua part until recently.”

His eyes narrowed. “Rule of thumb: don’t summon anything you can’t kill within two swings.”

“Good thing this is just an angel.”

“Yeah. And if he looks at you funny, I’m kicking his shiny ass.”

Ava smiled thinly. “Get in line.”

It had been a long while since she’d last performed a ritual summoning, and the target had not once been one of Big J’s crew. As Sins sat a step away from the throne of Hell, it usually didn’t take a summoning to get a demon’s attention. Still there had been times when Ava found herself stranded and ignored and summoning a demon seemed the best and most convenient method to get her job accomplished. Summoning an angel shouldn’t be too difficult. However, it seemed better to double check before she started uttering incantations. The last thing she needed was the wrong sort of attention.

“Better call for Pixley,” she muttered absently.

“Pixley?” Dante echoed, his expression drawn in confusion. “What’s a pixley?”

“Pixley is a she, not a what. And she’s the curator of the Unholy Damned.”

“This is a Hell thing, right? You’re talking about a Hell thing.”

Ava nodded. “It’s the library, more or less. It’s where we keep records of events, deaths, catastrophes and a register of the souls rejected by Big J.”

Dante whistled. “Must be quite the list.”

“You have no idea,” she agreed. “Sometime during the Crusades we decided it’d be easier on Pixley if we implemented a quill that wrote on its own. She rarely got a fresh breath of sulfur as it was.”

She held up a hand, flattening her palm so it faced the ceiling. A slow stream of shimmering red smoke rose from her flesh, cracking as it touched the air. Ava hadn't done this in a while. She'd forgotten how soft it appeared at first, assuming the characteristics of a hazy cloud. It seemed calm, serene, which made its thunderous explosion seem like a hydrogen bomb.

"Fuck!" Dante screamed, shielding his eyes. A brilliant blaze of light tore through the air, then died to a gentler hue of red. It wasn't enough to attract attention from the road, but it provided something other than darkness.

"Pixley!" Ava shouted, grinning as her companion jumped again. "Get your ass up here!"

"Jesus," Dante groaned, slapping his hands over his ears. "Warn a guy before you do that."

"Sorry."

"You know, that 'vamps have enhanced senses' thing isn't a myth."

"Sorry."

"Goddamn." He shook his head. "Does that even work?"

"You tell me." This time, the answering voice wasn't Ava's.

Dante jumped again and spun around, his fangs descending with a vicious snarl. "The fuck!"

Behind him stood a short, petite woman whose white-gold hair was offset by a variety of wild, purple streaks. She looked young and held the sort of beauty most classified as cute, though everyone who knew her knew better than to label her as such. Like most creatures of Hell, Pixley was designed to appeal to one's sexual appetite. Today she sported thigh-high leather boots, a short black skirt and a sleeveless red top that exposed her midriff. While she lacked the supernatural tug of Sins like Luxi, there weren't many faithful humans who would remain true to their loved ones with her in the room. Behind her, as always, floated the Registration of the Damned, a large leather-bound text with the quill Ava had mentioned earlier. It never left Pixley's side.

Instinct guided Ava's attention to Dante. He didn't look anything but surprised and irritated at the newcomer's sudden appearance, which touched her in a way she doubted he would understand. It wasn't as though Ava thought so little of her looks—all Sins were stunning in their own way—still she had yet to see a man who would keep from drooling over one woman while on the arm of another. Perhaps such a creature existed after all.

Dante's strange immunity to other women wasn't the reason she had called the curator from her job. She still had an angel to summon. Thus, Ava gestured at the new arrival and said, "This would be Pixley."

Pixley smiled and waved, tossing the vampire an amused glance before redirecting her gaze to Ava. "Hey, girl."

"Any of you people know how to use a door?" Dante demanded, agitated and flustered, his words rushed as though he'd held them against their will. "Nearly gave me a heart attack."

"Yeah, but since your heart doesn't beat I think we'd worry less about that and more about other things," the curator replied sweetly.

"Your concern is overwhelming," the vampire retorted. Then his attention shifted to the floating book. "What the fuck is that thing?"

Pixley turned minutely, though she clearly knew to what he referenced. "That is the Registration," she said. "It has in it the names and crimes of the souls in the pit. It's constantly updated, so get used to the scratching noises."

"Uh-huh," Dante replied. "What's it doing here? The parchment need fresh air?"

"It goes where I go. I am the curator." Pixley made a funny face and turned back to Ava. "Who's he and why doesn't he know anything?"

Ava grinned. "He's a friend."

"I know stuff!" Dante snapped defensively.

"A good friend," Ava continued. "An earthbound friend."

"There's lots I know! Ava, tell her I know stuff."

She snickered again, unable to help herself. "He knows stuff."

"Yes, I daresay more than he ought to know," Pixley agreed enigmatically. Off Ava's astonished look, she rolled her eyes and said, "Oh for Pete's sake, sweetie, did you really think you could tell someone what you were without word reaching home?"

"I haven't said—"

"You might not have spelled it out in so many words, but one of the seven *dwarfs* isn't exactly a covert way to manipulate the rules. Points for effort."

"So why am I still here? If Lucifer knows I've told someone what I am—"

"He's still trying to figure out what to do with you," Pixley replied simply. "He's not exactly keen on dumping one of his favorites, but you effed up, and big time."

Dante still stared at the floating book. "Why does it come with you?"

Without missing a beat, Pixley answered, "Because I'm the curator."

"But—"

"If someone gets their hands on the book, they can cross their name off," Ava explained, her words rushed. "If they cross their name off, they cease to exist."

Dante paused. "And that's a bad thing?"

"Of course, it's a bad thing," Pixley said. "Big J and Lucifer have their deal for a reason. Big J wants sinners punished, and Lucifer does the punishing. To cease existence is to skip the punishment. If someone makes my list, we want to make sure they stay there." The quill's scratches grew in volume as though it sensed the topic of discussion. Pixley looked back to Ava. "A lot might have changed since those two fell out, but that's not one of them."

"Yeah, yeah," Ava said hurriedly. "So ... Lucifer knows Dante knows..."

"Yes."

"And he knows we're together."

"Yes."

"And I presume he knows about the Lower Six."

"The Binsfeld Brigade?" Pixley nodded. "Oh yeah, they've had his ear for a few days now. I can't say all that's going on, but he hasn't reached any decisions yet. I think he's just waiting for you to screw up."

"I need to summon an angel."

Pixley offered a blank stare. "Yeah. That'd be what I mean by 'screw up'."

Ava heaved a long sigh, her shoulders drooping. "I just want to talk to him," she said. "Sebastian, I mean. I know it's a long shot, but I feel as if I tell him what's going on, he might—"

"See that he's run you over and back up?" Dante ventured.

“My thoughts aren’t quite that optimistic, but something along those lines.” Ava inhaled and turned back to Pixley, whose benign smile had yet to waver. On anyone else, constant perkiness might seem creepy, but the curator had a curiously cheerful outlook on life. “I’ve never summoned an angel before. Is there anything in the archives that covers this?”

“Wait,” the vampire said slowly. “That’s why she’s here? Why would anyone from Hell know how to summon an angel?”

“Lucifer and Big J’s arrangement calls for it,” Pixley explained. “Granted, since they fell out, it hasn’t been utilized as much—”

“You mean since the war in Heaven?”

The curator released a high-pitched giggle. “Oh goodness, no.”

“Some things about Lucifer and Big J’s relationship have been distorted by modern theologians,” Ava told him.

“What? Like what?”

“Like all of it.”

Pixley shook her head. “He’s funny.”

“Thanks,” Dante said dryly.

“Don’t feel bad,” Ava told him. “This isn’t common knowledge. Only the Sins and ... well, Pixley knows about it.”

The curator grinned. “I only know because of my position. Lucifer told me he likes to keep up appearances, but knew I’d do enough digging to find out, anyway.”

“Essentially, Big J first enlisted Lucifer’s help in the Garden,” Ava said. “Once Lucifer proved humans weren’t the brightest bulbs in the box, he was pretty much Big J’s go-to guy. But it wasn’t until before the Great Flood that anyone had the idea of a place to put people not deserving of Paradise.”

“Thus Big J created Hell,” Pixley continued, her tone rolling smoothly into that of an aged storyteller. “And sent his most trusted confidant to command those who failed the earthly test.”

Ava nodded. “A part of that involves sending up demons and whatnot to tempt humans into wickedness. Those who pass the test go up, and those who fail go down.”

Dante’s attention shifted between them, confused but seemingly following the discussion all the same. “Okay,” he said. “So ... what was this falling out?”

Pixley shrugged. “Lucifer thought Big J was too harsh.”

He blinked. “Lucifer did?”

“Yeah,” the curator agreed. “Eternity is a *long* time to suffer, and some have been there a lot longer than others. Furthermore, Lucifer sees things Big J doesn’t ... and because of that, he wanted to see about allowing a few souls into Paradise after a period of time served. If that wasn’t negotiable, he at least wanted to offer them the chance to cross their name out of the book to stop existing altogether. Big J said no, and his word is final.”

The quill’s strokes again became louder.

“It became Lucifer’s ambition after that to make things as horrible as possible in the pit to get Big J’s attention and guilt him into mercy.” Ava sighed, running a hand through her hair. “And our workload went into overkill. This was several hundred years ago, and thus far Big J hasn’t let up, at all.”

A moment lapsed. Dante stared at her blankly before blinking and shaking his head



again. "This doesn't make any sense."

Ava frowned. "What doesn't?"

"Lucifer doesn't want Big J to know he has the Sins in human form, even though they were chummy."

"They're not anymore," she retorted. "They haven't spoken in generations."

"But you were formed before all this happened, right?"

It was Pixley who answered. "Lucifer was told to tempt humans by any means necessary. He and Big J used to do this a lot ... try to psych each other out with bets against humanity."

"Charming," Dante replied, looking uneasy.

"All that being said," Ava interjected, "the guidelines to summoning angels are definitely archived at the Unholy Damned."

Pixley beamed. "Definitely!"

"So how do I do it?"

"Oh, you don't."

Ava's grin faded a bit. "What?"

While the grin remained on the curator's face, she shook her head with what seemed to be as close to genuine regret as she could manage. "I'm sorry, Ava," she said. "I have been instructed by Lucifer not to offer you any assistance."

The words sent a sharp shiver through her bones—a ripple that had the red cloud she'd conjured weakening. Things grew dim and foggy, as though at once trapped inside a dream. Still Ava knew she couldn't have heard right. She and Pixley had always been friendly, if not exactly friends. "What?"

"My orders are perfectly clear," Pixley said. "Lucifer thought you might attempt to contact your lover, and he likewise knew you would have to rely upon my services in that regard. Under no circumstance am I to do anything but heed your call and determine your motives. Since your motives have proven counterproductive to Lucifer's desires, I am unable to proceed from here."

"Treacherous bitch," Dante spat.

Pixley ignored him. "Furthermore," she continued, "this breach of confidence is the last violation Lucifer could tolerate."

Another shiver rushed through Ava's body, this one nearly freezing her with fear.

"The fuck you mean *breach of confidence*?" Dante roared, his fangs descending. "After you blabbed about Lucy-Lucifer's fucking soft side?"

"You confuse what is forbidden for what is little-known," Pixley replied calmly.

"Lucifer never barred anyone from discussing his true nature. He just prefers we act with caution, but otherwise hasn't prohibited anyone from divulging what we know. However, Ava has proven herself clumsy with privileged information."

Ava didn't realize her steps guided her away from Pixley until Dante stormed forward, placing himself between her and the curator. "You touch her," he snarled, "and you're losing something."

"Chivalry from a vampire." Pixley's smile turned sinister. "How charming."

"You wanna test me, you condescending cunt?"

The curator's expression darkened. "I don't find you quite as funny now. Rest assured, however, I have been instructed not to bring Ava harm."

"No. You just run and tattle."

Ava wrapped a hand around her vampire's arm. "Dante..."

"On the contrary," Pixley replied. "Ava will almost definitely not receive any more calls from the pit after tonight."

Ava knew what was coming, and in the few seconds between epiphany and understanding the only intelligible thought her mind threw at her was Pixley was right: Dante was quite chivalrous. He put himself between her and danger, no matter that she was stronger and always saving *his* ass from whatever mess he managed to create.

He'd done more for her in one simple, stupid act than anyone else had done for her since creation. He truly cared about her.

It was a pleasant thought, and consequentially the last she had before the world went black.

\*

He had no idea what the fuck had happened. The she-bitch vanished into black along with her demented checklist, and now Ava lay in his arms. Dante didn't even remember turning to face her, didn't remember anything beyond the small, peaceful smile on her lips before her head fell back and her eyes rolled up. Then everything went slow. Ava had tumbled toward the floor, her neck craned and her mouth ajar, and all thought abandoned him. Everything abandoned him. He didn't hear the honk of car horns or the creak of the wood beneath his feet.

It took a few seconds, but finally he realized his was the voice shouting her name in blind panic. And then he moved—racing through the space Pixley had occupied before vanishing, desperate for the world outside the skeletal mansion. Cool night air touched his skin and the weight compressing his long-dead lungs lifted without warning. He carried her a good ten yards away from the house before collapsing to his knees, his frantic gaze consuming her face as his hands blindly searched for injury.

"Ava! Ava!" The time lapse between her blackout and the wonderful opening of her bright, amber eyes was likely ten seconds, fifteen at most. However, by the time she looked at him again it seemed hours had passed. The longest quarter minute of his life. He didn't know if he would ever stop gasping. "Ava," Dante sputtered urgently. "You're all right, aren't you? Tell me you're all right."

She blinked in confusion, then frowned and pressed a hand to her head. "When did we go outside?"

"You passed out."

"I what?"

"In there. You passed out." The relief flooding his veins was unlike anything he'd ever experienced. Dante gasped again, holding her head to his chest. "Fuck, sweetheart, you can't scare me like that."

"Sorry."

The word sounded so strange he couldn't help his bubble of nervous laughter. She was all right. All that mattered was she was all right.

Vampire senses were a funny thing, as he'd mentioned earlier. He saw what no human saw, his ears often picked up conversation not meant for him, and whenever something smelled strong, pungent, or different, he was always the first to know. Yet in the midst of his relief, in the heart of visually verifying she was all right, it took at least two minutes to realize something was wrong. It took two seconds to determine what.

Ava's scent wasn't Ava's anymore. Not the way he knew her.

She smelled human.

## Chapter Nine

No words were exchanged over the long walk back, though every few seconds Dante felt the slow sizzle of Ava's gaze as she alternated from staring at him to staring at the road. He never glanced back. He couldn't. He was too shaken, too afraid, and he knew if he looked at her, she would recognize it.

Human. She was human now. Whatever greater end toward which they'd labored had failed. Gone were the late night scuffles, the demons they often picked off just to alleviate boredom. Gone were the few times he'd foolishly asked to spar only to find his ass on the ground in seconds, her cocky, sexy smirk hovering over his face. Her body had softened into a mortal vessel, and though she was still stronger than any human he'd ever met, it meant her lifeline now carried an expiration date.

Ava hadn't said much, but he knew she felt it. When she patted her body in search of injury, her hand had lingered over her chest a beat too long to dismiss. Her eyes had darkened, then relaxed with grim acceptance. Dante hadn't done much more than watch and help her to her feet.

The walk back was strained and awkward. Perhaps that was it then. They simply weren't going to talk about it.

Once the hotel was in sight, though, his resolve to leave her be wavered. Something huge had just taken place—something with repercussions that had yet to reveal themselves. All he knew was he needed to take care of her. It didn't matter Ava was stronger than anyone he knew, and he had no idea how to start caring for someone who never showed weakness. He just knew he needed to try.

"You want me to find a vending machine?" he asked. "Are you hungry, at all?" He'd never noticed how strange his voice sounded after a lengthy period of inactivity.

Ava favored him with a grateful smile. Her expression was bright and awake, and after the silence it nearly brought him to his knees. She was so strong—a tower of fortitude. He'd never known any other woman who could go through something like what had happened at Avonlea without wilting, not one who possessed any softness about her, anyway. But then Ava was the only strong woman in his life. The only one who wanted without needing.

Ava didn't need him. She *wanted* him. Dante had never before appreciated the difference. Not like he did now—looking at her wonderful, bright face, which wished for nothing more than his presence. His company. His being at her side.

"I'm not hungry," she said at last. "Is that strange?"

"I don't think so."

"I thought being human would make me hungry. All they seem to do is eat."

He tossed her a cautious glance, his throat tightening. So they would discuss it after all. "Human?"

Ava nodded and shuddered, crossing her arms. "I guess I should be happy," she said softly. "At least this means Lucifer's not going to kill me. Or you."

"Me?"

"I thought there was a chance he'd make me kill you for knowing what you do." She shrugged a shoulder. "It seemed like something he'd think up."

“Charming guy, your boss.”

“He might not be as bad as his rep, but he’s still not a pushover.” Ava smiled thinly. “And that’s former. He’s cut me loose now.”

Dante swallowed hard. “Are you all right?”

“I don’t know yet.”

It wasn’t exactly what he wanted to hear, but he knew better than to push for more. Yes and no answers weren’t available right now, and no amount of prodding could make it otherwise.

“Let’s get you inside,” he said, guiding her to her room. What she needed was a good night’s sleep.

What she needed was nowhere in the ballpark of what he needed.

Once inside, Dante exhaled and flipped on the light switch, drinking her in as she moved around the room. There weren’t any bruises marring her milky flesh—none that he could see. The largest wounds were likely the sort he couldn’t heal.

Ava looked at him and smiled softly, making him feel more vulnerable than he had in the whole of his existence. “You were really freaked, weren’t you? When I collapsed.”

“Wouldn’t say freaked.” She arched an eyebrow and his defenses met the gutter. Dante sighed, looking to the floor. “All right,” he conceded with a sigh. “Fuck, you’re the strongest person I know. When you fell, I fell with you.”

Her lips twitched. “You were there to catch me.”

“You don’t need catching.”

“Not normally, but I did tonight.” Ava moved toward him, running her hands through her hair until ribbons of auburn cascaded over her shoulders. “Things have been ... well, crazy, and I don’t know how to feel about a lot of things. But tonight ... when I saw you, I wasn’t afraid. It’s insane, Dante. A couple days ago ... god ... but tonight...” Her hands crisscrossed as she grasped the hem of her shirt, and it didn’t dawn on him that she was going to draw it over her head until the offending garment between them was gone and he was left staring at her white, lacy bra.

“Ava...”

“I’m not afraid anymore.”

He dragged his gaze away from her breasts long enough to find her eyes. “You’re not?”

“No.”

“Afraid of what?”

“You. This.” She gestured between them. “I don’t understand it, but ... you...”

A harsh, shuddering breath ricocheted through him, knowledge warring with desire. She’d lost more than he could begin to imagine tonight—something had crawled up inside her and every fiber of her delectable body had weakened. There was every chance she reached out now only for the need to connect with someone who could hold her to solid ground. He knew it—he knew she could snap to herself at any second and reestablish the wall between them. The one she couldn’t possibly be ready to conquer.

The man inside knew this, and furthermore knew what he should say.

But Dante was not a man beyond cosmetics. Not here—not where it counted. For a few precious seconds he’d feared he’d lost her, and his body was in desperate need of hers. He needed to reassure himself she wasn’t lost, after all. That she was, indeed, as tangible as she seemed. Her expression was open and trusting and she stood before him in

an invitation the blind could spot. He wanted her. He wanted her warmth against his skin and her pussy cradling his cock. Wanted her lips against his and her hair curled around his fingers. Wanted to feel her gasp and spasm against him. Wanted so many things.

Most of all, he wanted to commit her to memory. If they were on borrowed time he would make the most of it. Learn her now before she slipped through his fingers forever.

Words clawed at his throat, but he shoved them aside. The next thing he knew, he'd closed the space between them and jerked her into his arms, his mouth crashing over hers with urgency he barely recognized. She offered no resistance. Her arms flew around his neck without hesitation as her tongue plunged inside his mouth, mimicking the eager thrust of her hips against his erection. He'd never felt so fucking sensitive in his life—so scorched by the touch of any woman. So ablaze by the feel of her squirming against him. A growl savaged his throat as reality crashed hard with fantasy. Her lips fell slack with a half-moan, her tongue curling under his teeth as she grasped his upper arms to leverage herself against him. The wall collapsed, taking with it things she'd told him out of some sense of self-preservation. The things she'd told him to keep her heart from shattering any more than it already had. She'd already lost herself once, and though there was no hesitation in the way her lips molded against his, he felt her reserve. Her fear. Her absolute terror of falling again.

Of falling the way she was.

Dante growled into her mouth, digging his fingers into her firm ass and rubbing his cock against her molten sex. He wasn't ready, and at the same time he'd never been *more* ready. Her warmth had his flesh melting off his bones, and the burn had never been so sweet. She tasted so feminine. All things that made her Ava. Made her the woman to whom he'd lost his heart when he wasn't paying attention. The girl. The woman. The Sin.

"So sweet," he murmured against her lips when they broke apart, his hungry mouth dipping to taste her throat before he could miss her warmth. "So fucking sweet."

"Ungh..."

"Wanted this so long." He sucked her flesh between his teeth and tugged. "Wanted. Couldn't touch. Not like this..." Warm breasts filled his palms, thumbs exciting her nipples through the tantalizing fabric of her bra. "Of course, I didn't know it. Couldn't know it. Couldn't see what I see now."

Every inch of her trembled under his touch. "What do you see?" she whispered. How a nymph could sound so shy was beyond him, but there was nothing of the seductress who had just a few minutes before shed her shirt and proclaimed her body his for the taking.

"You."

She shrugged self-consciously, doing her best to ignore his wandering hand before he snapped the clasps holding up her bra. The offending fabric slipped down her arms and bared her breasts to his hungry eyes as her arms twitched with the ostensible need to cover herself. How she resisted, he didn't know. For a woman who had only been naked with a man once before...

He bit back a growl at the thought, at once desperate to tear into her body and stake his claim on her, at the very least with his dick if not with his fangs. He thought he'd had perfection before, but the failings of the past fell in shame when placed in the light of Ava's purity.

Her self-awareness humbled him. It betrayed a desire to be desirable, as if the notion

were a stretch of the imagination. "You're soft," Dante whispered, dragging his fingertips around her back until he had her breasts cradled in each palm once more. "You smell..."

"I smell?"

He glanced up wryly and chuckled. "Delicious."

"Oh. I thought you meant I stink."

A scoff. "Hardly," he replied, his tongue flicking one of her nipples. "You're real. Earthy. Smell like ... *Ava* ... just..."

"I didn't know *Ava* was a branded scent."

He laughed again. "I prefer to keep it to myself," he replied, falling to his knees as his mouth moved southward, dropping kisses over her taut belly. "Don't know how you do it."

A hard shudder commanded her body. "Do what?" she asked breathlessly.

"You're so hard."

"Ummm ... thanks?" *Ava* replied, uncertain, before regaining confidence. With an air that had been nonexistent a fraction before, she quipped, "And here I thought that was my line."

Dante aimed another amused glance upward. "You gotta be hard," he explained, tonguing her bellybutton and tugging at her slacks. "All muscle and fortitude ... so strong. So hard, and I don't understand it. Don't understand how someone so hard can be so fucking soft."

A low moan of protest slipped through her lips. "I'm not soft."

Her slacks bunched at her ankles, freeing his fingers to explore her panties. The dewy circle at the crotch had him mesmerized, as did the shuddering breaths rocketing through her small, fiery body. And before he could help himself, he'd dipped under the elastic and deftly combed through her damp curls. "Not soft?" Dante whispered, rubbing his nose against her. "I beg to differ."

"Ohh..."

"Has anyone tasted you here?" he asked softly, bunching her panties entirely to the side to bare her pussy to his ravenous gaze. The question didn't need an answer. Sebastian was the only man who had ever been near her pussy, and the thought of another's mouth on her perfect flesh fed Dante's demon a jealous rage unlike anything he'd ever felt. He didn't want to know.

As it was, *Ava* tensed the second he breathed across her delicate skin. "You don't... Dante..."

"Mmm?"

"You don't need to ... do that."

He looked at her. "Need has nothing to do with it, sweetheart. You really don't know how wonderful you are, do you? How you look ... how fucking lovely you are. And you smell so sweet ... fuck, you make my mouth water."

She blinked prettily, her expression bewildered. "You ... you like doing that?"

Dante quirked his head. "Surprised?"

"I ... I don't..." *Ava* blinked hard and looked away. "I just ... my sister indicated that ... when it comes ... damn it, I'm six thousand years old and I don't know anything about this. Luxi has told me a lot of men she meets don't like that—"

"Vamps rely on the senses, sweetheart. I don't know anything about what humans like." Dante swallowed hard. "Give me a chance to show you what I like."

“He tried,” Ava continued nervously, still not looking at him, speaking as though he had not. “Sebastian ... he tried, but I was too nervous to ... respond. My leg was shaking too hard—just one leg, not both. Isn’t that weird?”

Dante wrapped his arms around her legs and buried his face in her belly. He didn’t want to hear, but it was important that she speak and thus he didn’t dare interrupt.

“I barely felt anything. I was too...” Her hands found his shoulders and squeezed. “You don’t ... you don’t need to try.”

He scoffed and nuzzled her hot, delectable flesh defiantly. “I told you need has nothing to do with it. I want your taste on my tongue. Want you to ride my face so good I’d suffocate if I were alive.” Dante fisted her panties and rendered them useless with a fierce tug. “On the bed with you.”

He kept expecting her to snap back to herself, and she kept surprising him with her resilience. Before his incredulous eyes, she kicked off her shoes and wiggled out of the slacks that had pooled at her feet. She moved quickly but without objection, and when she turned around and sat on the mattress, her expression was clear. Anxious. Fearful. Eager.

And his. All his.

He couldn’t lose this—any of this. Her trust. Her confidence. Dante inhaled sharply. He had to do this right by her. Had to convey with his hands and mouth how much she meant to him.

He made quick work of his clothing, intensely aware of her attention following the trail of his T-shirt as he stripped it off his chest. And when she gasped as his cock bobbed free, his gaze fogged and the demon’s need overpowered the man’s desire to do this softly. She was spread on the bed, her lips swollen from his kisses, her legs open and her pussy his for the taking. She didn’t fight, she offered. Ava offered herself to him.

Dante shuddered, wrapping a hand around his erection. “Spread your lips for me.”

Her alabaster skin melted into bright red. “My...” She hesitated before her hands trailed downward, framing her cunt as a shy smile tickled her mouth. “I feel so naked.”

“Mmm, yeah.”

Ava squirmed, laughing. “It just feels weird,” she said. “I’ve never been so ... umm ... nude before.”

He smirked, reaching for her foot with his free hand, his other pumping his cock faster. “I find that hard to believe.”

She blinked and looked away, the pink in her skin turning a deeper red. “I mean ... not with someone like this.”

Dante drew in a short breath. She hadn’t let Sebastian see her in the light like this? Hadn’t spread herself on a bed, perky breasts standing proudly in the air, nipples drawn and pussy flushed with liquid need? She hadn’t shown this to anyone else. He was the first.

*Fuck.* It was no wonder he was in love with her. She kept surprising him. She’d never stop. Dante took another step toward her, the movement ricocheting through his insides like a shotgun blast. “Never?” he murmured.

“Nerves. If I’d—let’s just say, it would’ve killed the mood.”

He nodded, forcing the jealous knot down his throat. “You nervous now?” He trailed his right hand up the silky contours of her left leg until her mound was under his fingertips.



“Are you kidding me?” Ava replied shrilly. “Dante... I...”

“You can stop this whenever you want.”

“But I don’t want.”

“You don’t?”

“No. No, I want...” She broke away, finding some random spot along the wall. “I don’t know. I don’t know anything anymore. What I felt tonight was so different. And you were there and you’re here and I don’t know. But something’s happening. It wasn’t just ... when we’ve kissed, there’s been something.”

“I’ll say.”

“And I knew... Is there any way we can talk when I’m slightly less naked?”

Dante smirked and kneeled before her. “Get my way, and naked’s all you’ll ever be.”

“Your way is science fiction.”

“Baby, we’re the stuff of science fiction.”

Ava fidgeted and blushed. She was the most adorable thing he’d ever seen. And before she could fidget her way into changing her mind, he slid his arms under her hips and lifted her pussy to his ravenous mouth. “But we’re real, aren’t we?” he continued, nuzzling her soaked flesh. “My Ava.”

“Not ... *yours*.”

His heart jerked, but he ignored it, deciding instead to focus his attention on the gift open and ready for him. Perhaps he could change her mind if he gave her what no man had given her. If he showed her what her body could do. “Can’t you be mine?” he asked, parting her lips and gently running his thumb over her clit.

The response was immediate. Ava gasped and twisted, her pelvis thrusting hard against him and her head falling back against the mattress. “Gah.”

“You were saying?”

“You’re a vampire.”

Dante frowned thoughtfully and caressed her again. “No, I don’t believe you were saying that.”

“I’m not immortal now.”

“Not seeing the problem,” he replied. “If you’re mine, I’ll make sure that’s forever. There are ways of making you immortal.”

“I learned my lesson, though.” Her hips arched off the bed, beseeching his fingers for further attention. “I don’t do this.”

“Do what?”

Ava’s expression furrowed in confusion. “Men. Not anymore.”

“So what’s this to you?”

She shook her head, though her expression bore no sign of resistance. “I don’t know. I just need it.”

“Mhmm.” Dante again arched an eyebrow. “You need *me*.” The words were charged, even if he knew they weren’t true. She didn’t need him, she’d chosen him. She’d chosen him for this.

“What?”

“You need me.” He placed his thumb over her clit again as he soaked up the sight she presented. Her breathing had become labored in a second, beads of sweat gathering at her forehead, her eyes sparkling with warmth he’d never before seen. “That’s why we’re here.”

“No,” she replied, arching hard against him.

“No?”

“I want you.”

He grinned. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. Unless you plan on staring at me all night.”

Dante skimmed her labia with his fingers. “Wouldn’t mind. You’re very pretty.”

“Dante—”

“Gorgeous, even.”

“Stop.”

“Make me.” He grinned and waggled his tongue at her, his gaze dropping again to her pussy. “Can’t stop. You’re so warm and wet, and I’m a parched man.”

Another jerk of her hips, this time accompanied by a whimper of protest. “If your goal is to make me less nervous, it’s really amazing how fantastically you’re failing.”

“I like you nervous,” he returned. “Nervous makes you wiggle.”

An anxious little laugh rushed between her lips. “You have no idea.” Ava’s eyes squeezed shut, her hips moving along with his fingers as though she were guiding his attention back to where she wanted it. “Mmm. Dante...”

“I love you like this. Panting for me. And you have such a sweet little clit...” He flicked her softly, eliciting another sharp jolt. “And you smell...”

She wiggled again. “If you keep saying that, I’m going to hide in the shower.”

A smirk stretching his lips, he slid his fingers over her entirely. “Never thought a Sin could be so self-conscious,” he mused, pressing her harder as his mouth neared its target. Her thick, womanly smell just about did him in. It was difficult enough keeping his mind on track. If he moaned aloud, he might forfeit the advantage. After all, this was almost more for him than for her. Savoring her taste. Committing her to memory. Knowing every sinful, juicy crevice of her pussy so he had something to carry with him for eternity.

Her whimpers echoing in his ears ... god, yes, this was for him. All for him. Dante licked his lips. “Just occurred to me ... I never got to eat tonight.”

“Oh fuck.”

“Think I want a taste.” He rubbed his cheek against her inner thigh. “Don’t worry, sweetheart.”

“Who’s worried?” she replied with bravado she clearly didn’t feel.

“You’re trembling.”

“You’re nose-to-nose with my girly parts. And you’re, you know...” She wiggled again. “Dante...”

“I’m Dante,” he agreed, spreading her again and baring her sweet, vaginal opening to his mouth. His prick swelled. She was so wet. God, she was so fucking wet and tight as a newly-tuned drum. And she was his. If only for right now—for this moment—she was all his.

“That’s not what I meant. I—”

“Just want you to remember which name to scream.” And without further prompting, he dove into her warmth and lost himself entirely.

\*

She’d never felt anything like this.

The night Sebastian stole her virginity she’d nearly torn the bed apart with her

body's violent, nerve-induced tremors. While she didn't remember hating the experience, any pleasure she had taken away from the night had been long buried under the hell that followed. There wasn't much in her memory beyond a sting of pain and the unbearable sense of being invaded. It had been quick and, in her mind, hopelessly romantic.

The fairytale was gone, and with it its fluffy, protective cushion. This bed was real. The quilt beneath her body. The cracks in the ceiling. The air against her skin. The vampire kneeling before her, delicately exploring her soaking skin with his mouth. Electric shocks followed every tentative lap of her flesh, but after a few seconds, the ache in her clit swelled to heights heretofore unexplored and she realized he was teasing her. He was touching her but not touching her. Tasting her, but not tasting her. The tip of his tongue tentatively traced the walls of her inner labia, his thumb navigating the sensitive area around her clit without giving her what she wanted. Teasing. Dante, whose legendary lack of patience would make him any gambler's best bet, was *teasing* her. "What ... what are you..."

He glanced at her face. The shock of watching him as he sampled her pussy with his mouth rocketed through her with unexpected urgency. Ava gasped and jerked, her head tugging her back to the mattress, but her eyes wouldn't follow. She kept watching him. Watching as he grinned and waggled his face against her. Watching as his tongue parted her lips and slipped over her clit, sliding back and forth with such tenderness she would have cried had it not felt so good. And more. More. Every touch left her wanting more. "Oh my... God."

Dante chuckled and licked her opening once, twice, then finally sank his tongue inside her, lapping delicately at her inner walls. "Mmm."

"Oh..."

"Mhmm," he agreed, delving deeper, the rich sound of his murmur reminding her of a large cat. Licking up milk and purring its contentedness into the saucer. He pulled away once to smack his lips, eyebrows flickering devilishly. "Not so shy tonight, are you, sweetheart?"

"That ... oooh, I like that."

He had the audacity to chuckle again. "Good thing, that," he replied. "'Cause, baby, you're delicious."

Dante was in her again before she could reply, tongue plunging in and out of her pussy as his fingers brushed over her mound to tickle her clit again. And rational thought abandoned her completely. She felt herself detach in favor of the white-hot shards tearing through her veins. It was so good—so good, but not enough. He tasted her but teased her all the same. Her slippery pearl remained woefully unattended, given a nudge or a cursory tap every few seconds, which only fueled the fire pushing at her insides. She needed something she couldn't identify. She needed something she'd never before felt. She needed... "Dante!" Ava sobbed, arching her hips in offering. He followed without breaking stride. "Ah ... I need. *I need.*"

He pulled away again and licked his lips, sliding a finger into her slick passage in the absence of his mouth. "What do you need?"

"I... I don't know."

He quirked his head and ran his fingers over her clit again. Again, an electric shock jolted through her body. Again, it was woefully short-lived. "You don't know?" he asked, rubbing his cheek against her inner thigh. "You have no idea what your body is capable

of, do you?”

“Ahhh...”

“Beyond those fancy-dancy moves you do ... the way you move, contort. The way you mold yourself into a weapon...” He nuzzled her pussy again. “But you don’t know what you can do down here. How you can switch from pain to pleasure in a blink. How these legs guard something so precious ... so wholly ... *Ava*.”

“Wholly *Ava*?”

Dante nodded, licking up her slit again. “You’re here. You’re my girl, if only for tonight. For this moment. Right here.”

Ava whimpered and jerked, rolling her hips in nameless desperation. His voice clashed with understanding. It wasn’t until he’d lowered his head again that words separated from sound and made sense. Just for tonight. Just for the moment. Did he really think this was all it was to her? A night—a single night. Nothing more beyond a venture into stolen time? The thought made her stomach twist. Whatever had occurred at Avonlea, whatever had been brewing between them over the last couple of days, wasn’t the sort of fire one could douse with a quick roll in the sack. She knew he’d said as much earlier, but the note in his voice lent her pause. If this was fleeting, *Ava* wasn’t built for it. She couldn’t share this passion with someone and look at them the next day as though nothing had changed. As though she hadn’t born herself vulnerable in the most intimate way possible to his hands and mouth. To *him*.

This moment wouldn’t be good enough. If she let him into her body...

But there was a fine line between stolen moments and a relationship. She hadn’t yet recovered from what had transpired a mere week ago, and now she’d all but thrown herself into the fire again. Yet something had changed. Oh god, yes, something had changed. Dante looked at her as though she was his redemption. He touched her in such a manner she might believe he felt the soft tenderness of his own caresses against his skin. In the way he looked at her—the way he’d held her when she opened her eyes and awakened after fainting—never before had she felt more cherished.

All from Dante. It didn’t seem real. And she didn’t want it to go away.

“This is what you need, isn’t it?” he whispered, flattening his tongue over her clit. She must have spasmed, for the next thing she knew he chuckled against her wet flesh hard enough to rack her body with violent tremors. “This is your magic button, sweetheart. Rub here, lick here...” His mouth closed around her swollen pearl and gave a good tug, earning a hard gasp and another eager thrust of her hips. The tip of his tongue balled again, rubbing her, teasing her, loving her so gently she nearly came apart just for his tenderness. “Mmm,” he mused, pulling away again. “You like that, don’t you?”

Ava lifted her hips again. “Dante, please.”

“Please what?”

“More.”

“More of what?”

She scowled at him. “Jackass.”

A grin tugged at his lips. “Now, now. No need for name calling.”

“I’m burning up!”

He shifted and covered her pussy with his hand, rubbing her with the heel of his palm. “I’ll say.”

“Guh.”

“Makes me so hard,” he purred, his gaze eating her up. “Watching you moan. Feeling you writhe. You look at me and I...” Dante broke off and turned his attention back to her sensitive flesh. “You’re perfect. You’re so perfect. This pussy. Every delicious move your body makes. Your skin. I just wanna lose myself in you. Over and over and over again.”

His lips slid over her clit again before she could muster a reply, his right hand slipping up the length of her abdomen to palm a breast as his other hand ventured to her opening and danced across her labia. “So wet,” he murmured. “Feel this, baby? Feel your honey rolling over me? I tell you, a man could die happy here. Give me some and all I want is more. More of this. More of your taste. More of you.” He pressed two fingers into her opening, inhaling sharply when she mewled. “The sweet little sounds you make. For me, right? This is all for me. You’re letting me have every luscious inch.”

“Dante...”

“You want me inside you?” His fingers slipped inside her again, then out and in again. In easy seconds, he’d developed a steady rhythm, stretching her, testing her, filling her. Stirring within her a hunger she barely understood, but reached to gratify nonetheless. Every thrust deepened her craving, gnawing away until there was nothing but the harsh desire to have it satisfied. And when his tongue flicked her clit again, thought dissolved into a blanket of ecstasy. White-hot bolts of pleasure liquefied her veins, centering in her stomach and massing to a boil so sweet she could barely stand it.

“That’s it, sweetheart,” Dante encouraged between licks, drawing her clit into his mouth and wagging his head. “Mmm. *Mmm*.”

“Unh...”

Ava forced herself to look down again, and the sight of Dante eagerly feasting on her body set her off. The beads of pleasure ignited into something fierce, something ruthless, something that forced her from her body entirely. Jolt after jolt of pure euphoria rattled through her skin, constricting her veins, rushing through her with potency unlike anything she’d every touched. The cries ripping off her lips barely sounded human, much less like they belonged to her—throaty, harsh and desperate. Her body tensed and released and he didn’t let her up. Wave after glorious wave rendered her thoroughly conquered, and Dante kept sucking. Kept licking. Kept laving her clit and exploring her pussy as though her body had secrets it had yet not betrayed.

“Dant—” She tried to sit up, but he overpowered her, his free hand flying to her thigh to hold her to the mattress as his mouth devoured. “Ahhh ... oh gohh ... stop. I ... what ... what are you ... oooohhh...”

He chuckled, leaving her clit with a parting lick before his mouth wandered to her opening again, lapping up her body’s juices. Every flicker delivered a sharp, electric shock, and the burn was so good she couldn’t decide whether she wanted to pull him closer or push him away. In the end her body chose for her, unraveling once again toward a dark abyss of pleasure. She didn’t know how long it lasted—time lost its meaning once she regained vision. Her skin prickled. Her chest heaved. Hot rolls of sweat trickled into her eyes.

Dante lay curled between her legs, his mouth twisted in a very pleased grin. “Ever feel anything like that?”

His voice triggered something primal. Something hot and needy. Before thoughts could connect with action, she’d sprung up and seized her vampire by the cheeks, hauling

his mouth to hers. And she devoured. She inhaled him, sucking on his tongue, drinking in his taste, intoxicated by her own essence upon his lips. Every crevice of his mouth was hers to explore. Hers. All hers.

“Oh, baby.” Dante’s arms enveloped her, pressing her back to the bed, his thick cock resting against her achingly wet flesh. “Guy could get used to this.”

“Amazing,” she gasped, sucking his lower lip between her teeth and edging backward. “My ... Dante...”

“Mmm, that’s right.” He thrust his hips hard against hers and chuckled when she moaned. “Your Dante. All yours.”

“Never ... never...”

“You’d never come before?” If anything, the satisfied grin on his lips spread wider. “Never send an angel to do a demon’s job.”

Ava blinked dumbly. “That’s what that was?”

“Want me to do it again? If you weren’t sure...”

She shook her head hard. “Oh god, no. No. I think you’ll kill me.”

His eyebrows perked. “It’s funny ... I hear you say no, but your body...” Another jerk of his hips rendered her a whimpering mess. “Oh yeah, your body wants more.”

“Dante...”

“It’s not the main event. Just a taste. A little sampler. I want more.” Dante’s mouth dropped her to throat, doctoring her skin with wet, ardent kisses. “Felt you come apart on my tongue. Now I gotta feel you around my cock. Squeezing me. Strangling me. Hurting me so good I’ll beg you for more. And you’ll wanna give it. You’ll give it over and over again.”

Something large pressed against her opening, parting her flesh as though it were a missing piece of her coming home. Ava willed her eyes shut. She couldn’t survive another orgasm, but she needed it all the same. Needed to feel what he promised. Needed him inside her—his body rocking against hers, plunging again and again. She needed it.

“Wrap your legs around me, precious.”

Ava snorted inelegantly. “Legs? What are legs?”

He barked an appreciative laugh. “In your case? Lethal weapons.”

“Not anymore.”

“Doubtful. You don’t need super strength to conquer worlds. You’ve already conquered mine.”

Damn, the things he said... “I can’t feel them,” she replied shyly. “My legs.”

“Better for me. Means I can do whatever I want.” A hand curled around her knee and stretched her leg around his waist. “Atta girl. Now your arms. Around my neck.”

Somehow she found the strength to obey, allowing him to edge them effortlessly up the mattress. Then she was stretched entirely across the bed with a pillow propped under her head and her legs spread to accommodate him. “It’s only been once,” she reminded him. His cock slid between her pussy lips, driving her insane with an impossible renewal of lust. Where her body had the strength to want more she didn’t know—all she knew was she did. She wanted more. She needed more. She needed in ways she didn’t know she could need, and she needed it now.

“I know,” Dante whispered, burying his face against her neck. “I know.”

How had she not known this side of him existed? How had she missed it? In the centuries they’d known each other, never had she accredited Dante with any form of

tenderness, yet now, as he pressed her body apart and slowly slid within her, it seemed so wholly obvious she doubted she could ever trust her own insight again. Her memories of him were warped forever, twisted into something different yet the same altogether. He didn't ram into her, though for the way he sucked in his cheeks, she could tell it was what he wanted. He didn't smirk at her; rather his gaze devoured her in wonder. Her name rolled off his lips as he found solace in the crook of her neck. Farther and farther, her pussy expanded and welcomed him, dragging him inside her cavern inch by agonizing inch. Her heart leapt into her throat and tears stung her eyes. It was too much—it wasn't enough. She needed less and more at the same time, and her body sat war-torn, splitting with pleasure and stinging with pain. It was nothing like she remembered.

God, it was so much better. "Ahhh..." Ava hissed, arching beneath him to propel his cock deeper within her. "Dante, please."

He murmured against her throat, then before she could blink, a growl ripped through his lips and his hips surged forward, burying himself as far inside her as physics would allow. She gasped and clutched at his forearms, her chest thundering so hard she thought it might break. Then there was nothing but Dante. Dante inside her. Dante's body pressed to hers, his heavy gasps rocking his chest against hers. He lifted himself onto his elbows. "I'm sorry," he panted. "Didn't mean to ... just ... started thinking. You're mine. Mine, Ava."

She blinked up at him. "What?"

He sucked in his cheeks and looked away, and suddenly she understood. The mind worked in ways she doubted even Big J understood. In that moment, they'd both compared this to Sebastian. He'd thought of her with another man on her and his reaction had been immediate. Primal. It should have scared her—it didn't. If anything, it made her want him more.

"It's okay," she whispered, lifting her head to kiss him. She needed closeness. She needed to feel his kiss as he moved against her. As he withdrew from her body, her flesh pulling against his, and sank inside her again.

"Ava..." His forehead came to rest against hers, his fingers curled against her cheeks. "God, so warm. Burning me up. Burning... You always this hot, baby?"

Ava rolled her head back and raised her hips as he slipped away again. No, no, no, she needed him inside. Why couldn't he understand that? She needed him inside. "I ... ahhh, umm."

He chuckled shortly. "I'll take that as a yes."

"Can't talk. Can't ... don't make me."

His lips brushed over one of her eyes, and she suddenly realized she had squeezed them closed. But she wanted to see—needed to see. She'd tried to hide before, but not now. Never again. She needed to look at him. She needed to drown in his eyes.

Perhaps he lived in her mind, for the next thing he said was, "Look at me." And she did as though awaiting his command. "So pretty," he whispered, stealing another kiss from her lips. "So tight. Squeezing my prick. Love this. God, how I love this. More, sweetheart?" He thrust harder without awaiting a response. "Do you love this too? Love the feel of me inside your cunt?"

Ava whimpered, digging her nails into his forearms and rolling her hips. "More. I need more."

"More of what?"

“You. Deeper.”

Dante smiled, nibbling on her lower lip, driving his cock harder inside her. “Like this? Oh ... that’s it, Sin. Squeeze me hard.”

For whatever reason, hearing him address her by her title sent white-hot sparks through her insides. “More,” she gasped again, wrapping her arms around his neck and kissing him before he could reply. It didn’t matter—his reply was in his body. In the slippery drive of his cock into her pussy, in the sound of flesh slapping together, in the squeaks of the mattresses and the slams of the headboard against the wall. In the throaty moans ripping off Dante’s lips and falling into her mouth. More, more, more. More of this. More of him. More of everything.

“Oh god.”

“Fuck yeah,” he agreed, pumping harder into her. Harder. Harder. It couldn’t be hard enough. She needed to meet that edge again. Meet it and fall over headfirst. “Fight me, precious. Fight me.”

“Need...”

“I know what you need.” He bit at her lips again before his attention drew southward, mouth peppering kisses along her skin until he had one of her nipples sucked between his teeth. “Need to come apart. I need it too. Need it. Want it. Wanna feel it. Want you coming around my prick.”

“Ahhh...” Her teeth pulled at her lower lip, her fingers tunneling through his hair as his hips smashed against hers. The burn she’d felt earlier flamed again, churning deliciously in the pit of her stomach. He kept pulling away, and while the feel of his cock dragging against her flesh had sparks flying, she needed more. She needed it—an *it* she couldn’t identify, but similarly couldn’t stop fighting to keep.

She needed...

“So beautiful. So beautiful.” He squeezed one of her breasts, his mouth playing with the other. “And all mine. All mine, Ava. You hear?”

She wouldn’t dream of denying him now. Not now. Not when she needed. “Yes. More. Dante ... *more*. Please!”

“So hot. So tight.”

“More!”

“All mine.” He shifted and something sharp skimmed her throat. Somewhere in the dark recesses of her mind, she knew what it was, but she didn’t care. The only thing that mattered was the burn. The sparks shooting through her body. The need to touch—need to feel—the *need*...

The need to keep him locked in her body. Time to fight back. The next time his cock stabbed her pussy, she contacted her muscles around him hard. Capture. Hold. *Need*.

“Fuck!” Dante roared, his head reeling back. “Oh god. *Oh yes*. Again!” He thrust harder, feral. “Again. Do that ... oh, Ava. *Ava. Ava. Ava. Ava. Ava*. My Sin. My Ava. Squeeze me. Fucking *yes*.”

She bucked wildly. “Dante!”

“Ava!” The hand at her breast was suddenly gone, suddenly between them. Then his fingers were over her clit. Rubbing her. Teasing her. Playing with her. The burn deepened, need expanded. She was so close. So *close*.

The second his fangs sliced into her throat, her body exploded. Wave after wave crashed over her, seizing her and carrying her somewhere she’d never before traveled.



The bed vanished. The walls vanished. Everything vanished—everything but Dante. Dante thrusting hard, growling into her bloodied throat as he trembled harshly and emptied himself inside her. Tiny pinpricks danced across her sweat-laced flesh. Pleasure roped her veins and held. And when it was over, when the last wave receded, he was still with her. Still a part of her. Still inside. Still hers.

And it hit her. What she'd known before, but hadn't realized. Hadn't understood. What she could only truly know at a moment like this?

He was hers. He was completely hers. Dante was hers.

And he always had been.

## Chapter Ten

There was no way he could turn his head and walk away. No way he could survive with only the memory of her. No pretending anything less than Ava at his side would ever be enough for him. No pretending. No telling himself one thing in preparation for what he'd inevitably lose. Losing Ava had no cushion. No bright side or silver lining. There was no going back from last night. Not while her warmth surrounded him. Not while the heat from her skin still had him sizzling. Not while he was still drunk on her kisses. Not while his cock was still nestled against her ass, hardened with the memory of how her pussy felt around him. She'd gasped and clawed at him, squeezed him until he popped, and she'd looked at him the entire time. She'd whispered his name. She'd held onto *him*. And she'd asked for more.

Now she was in his arms, and he had no idea how long she'd let him hold her. When the day broke against the sky, would she remember what she'd asked? Would she remember how she'd wanted him? Would anything remain with her? Had any of it been real, at all?

Dante inhaled sharply, running a hand down her arm. He'd been around long enough to identify next-to-perfect moments, often mistaking them for the true thing until something else reshaped his vision. Until he had a new appreciation for what perfection truly was. Perfection was here. Right here with Ava. She curled in his arms, believing in him without betraying a thing. He could do whatever he liked to her now and she couldn't stop him. She'd allowed him into her world and trusted him not to hurt her—and she didn't even realize it.

She had to know. Before they went any further with each other, she had to know.

A soft little moan spilled across her petal-pink lips. Dante buried his face in her hair, drew in her scent as the arm around her middle tightened. He wouldn't let go without a fight.

She awoke slowly, but the transformation had him spellbound. She was peaceful and still one second, then light touched her cheeks and her body stirred. Ava blinked sleepily and yawned, stretching her luscious curves against him. She paused when she encountered his erection, hesitated, then offered a grin and wiggled her delectable ass. "Good morning."

He murmured in response and his mouth dropped to her throat, irrevocably drawn to the mark he'd given her. Where he'd truly tasted perfection.

"Mmm..." Ava shivered, then twisted in his arms. She didn't balk when she saw her bedmate. Rather, it was as though her face had kissed the sun for as bright as she smiled at him. "You realize even if we had to fight all of Hell today, I'd be completely out of luck. My legs lost all functionality sometime between the third and fourth time."

"That's being gracious, sweetheart," Dante retorted with a smirk. Then sobering, he seized her lips in a long, delicious kiss. There could never be enough of this. "Taste so sweet..."

Her nose scrunched adorably. "Kissing me is gross first thing in the morning."

"I'll be the judge of that."

"Morning breath."

“Sins have morning breath?”

“One, I’m not a Sin anymore.” The words obviously bothered her, but she bulldozed them down without flinching, and he let her. They couldn’t run from what had happened forever, but at the very least, they had right now to enjoy each other. “And two,” she continued, “I lived in Hell. If anything my morning breath was all the more horrific.”

Dante grinned and kissed her again. “Mmm... Ava breath.”

“Stop that.” Ava paused with a contemplative frown, then kissed him again in an almost methodical manner, as though conducting an experiment. “How do you taste so good?”

Dante grinned. “No breath. No morning breath.”

“I’ve seen you breathe.”

“Voluntarily,” he replied, tucking a lock of auburn hair behind her ear.

“Well, no more kisses until I make my breath user-friendly.” She scooted to the edge of the bed, her hand dipping over the side in search of clothing. A soft smile crossed her face when she located his discarded tee. “Be right back.”

Fuck, she did more for his clothing than he ever could. Dante licked his lips and absorbed the way the black cotton contrasted with her creamy skin. He groaned when she slipped off the bed entirely. The hemline hit her at the hips, concealing her pussy and teasing him with glimpses of her ass. She was so bright this morning. So much lighter than he would ever have dreamt. There was no reason to believe it would last or that it meant anything beyond what she gave him, but against his better judgment, he hoped. He *hoped*.

“I love you.” The words were out before he could think to stop himself. It was what he wanted—what he needed. He needed this between them before they went further. He needed her to know what was at stake.

The look she gave him would remain with him forever. She turned around slowly, astonishment blanketing her face, her wide eyes drinking him in before falling into the softest warmth he’d ever known. It touched her lips, her cheeks, colored every inch of her skin. She had him drowning without effort. No one had ever looked at him like that.

No one.

He thought she would speak, she didn’t. Instead, she drew in a deep breath and stepped forward, hands gripping the hem of the tee and drawing it over her head, nothing left of her former shyness. Dante sucked in his cheeks. Fuck, she was a goddess. A warm, living, breathing goddess. A goddess the likes of which he hadn’t known existed until she stumbled into his life. It had just taken him a long time to realize what should have been obvious.

She climbed onto the bed and crawled up his body, hissing when the length of his cock dragged along her sopping pussy. His hands found her breasts, a shuddering breath rocking through his chest. “Perfect,” he whispered. “So fucking perfect.”

“I’m not perfect,” Ava replied, seizing his cheeks and drawing his mouth to hers. He moaned loudly against her lips, his hands dropping to her hips to anchor her into a hard thrust. She explored him eagerly, licking every crevice of his mouth, sucking on his tongue with desperate, reckless need. Her kisses were enough to inebriate the strongest of men. And when her hand slipped between them to position his cock at her opening, he would have sworn his entire existence had been a prelude to this moment. In Ava’s eyes, he was finally made whole.

“That’s it, sweetheart. Take me inside.”

She smiled shyly. “I’ve never done it like this,” she replied. “On top.”

“Good.”

“Good?”

“Fucking A. The less you’ve done with that angel, the better for me.” He lifted his head to suck her lower lip between his teeth. “Fewer limbs I need to sever.”

Ava smirked. “You’re gonna mutilate my ex?”

“He touched what’s mine.”

There was no response to that. No acknowledgment. No rebuttal. No rejection. Nothing. And the nothing both invigorated and offended him. She wasn’t denying it, refusing it as she had the night before, but after he’d proclaimed his love for her, he wanted something tangible. Something to solidify what he had here—what he touched now—was something he would have forever.

Instead, she kissed him. He just hoped her kisses were her way of saying what she couldn’t.

“What happened to morning breath?” he asked when they parted, nipping at her lips.

“I figure you can deal with it. Ava want now.”

“Ava want what?”

She merely grinned and sank down, and god, if the sight of her pussy swallowing his cock didn’t rattle him to the core. Dante bit back a moan and slid his hands up her legs, clutching hard as she rolled her hips against him. It was slow and delicious, and even if he yearned for a hard rutting to demonstrate how very much *his* she was, he knew this was important for her. Ava needed to know how this sort of control felt. She needed to know how she could steer his cock with the slightest jerk, wrangle him with a squeeze of her sweet vaginal muscles. She needed to know this brand of power.

And he wanted to be the one to show her. He wanted to be the one to show her everything. “You have such a pretty cunt.”

Her creamy skin turned a cute shade of red. “Do not,” she argued, her head rolling back.

“Mhmm. And I’m gonna show you everything it can do.”

“It doesn’t do magic tricks.”

Dante smirked wickedly, slipping his fingers up her sides until his hands were hooked under her shoulders. “Oh, baby,” he purred, encouraging her forward and moaning at the slight change of angle. “Fuck yeah. So hot. So wet. So fucking tight. You’re perfect. And everything you do is a magic trick.”

“You’re high.”

His grin widened and he stole a kiss from her lips. “On your sweet pussy.”

She blushed harder. “Dante…”

“That’s it, baby. Moan for me.”

And she did. She moaned. She whimpered. She came apart.

And she knew he loved her. She knew it. But she didn’t say it back.

\* \* \* \*

Sebastian had never felt right.

Ava’s cheek rested against Dante’s chest, her right hand drawing mindless patterns across his belly. Sometime over the last hour, they had collapsed into a post-coital coma,

only she hadn't slept as long as she would have liked. With her body aching from the newly-human kinks, well-loved, granted, and definitely worth every muscle strain, she couldn't ignore the implication of what had happened at Avonlea any longer.

Human was something for which she had not been prepared. Her exodus from Hell was supposed to come with its own subset of special powers. She'd wanted freedom from her existence, but not complete isolation. The knowledge she would never again feel the pull of the other side—the hint of the world to which she belonged—cut deeper than she would have imagined a day ago.

Lucifer hadn't killed her. He'd disowned her, and that hurt. A lot.

The steps she'd taken to get to this point still felt like something out of someone else's life. Sebastian had never felt right. He'd never trusted her enough to spend a full night with her as Dante had. His arms hadn't looped around her waist, and he hadn't kissed her out of the blue or brushed her hair out of her face when he thought she was asleep. Even now, Dante kept pulling her closer, determined to keep her from slipping away.

God, she was such an idiot. She'd fallen so quickly for Sebastian because of what he was—she hadn't seen anything past the wings and the halo. She'd been so damned human about it, assuming everything was either black or white with nothing in between. She'd thought because he was an angel he would have honor.

At what point had she forgotten all she knew? Had she tempted humans so long, immersed herself too fully into their culture that she started to believe, on some deep, demented level, their twisted interpretation of the world from which she came? Lucifer wasn't the villain the world assumed him to be, and Big J was certainly no fucking saint. Yet she'd fallen for it. She, above all others, should have known better, but she'd applied the label as carelessly as a preacher covering up a sex scandal.

Perhaps she had bought into the delusion for the hope of what it represented. Black and white meant there were moral absolutes. It meant there was such a thing as pure good and pure evil, when in fact those words only existed in the want of something no one could really understand. Perhaps she'd assumed, as a thing of Hell, she needed saving. Fuck, Ava didn't know. All she knew was her future had now been determined. She lay in Dante's arms—in the arms of a man who truly loved her—and though the freedom she wanted was hers, she couldn't stand the price at which it came.

Dante loved her. Holy fucking shit.

Ava sniffed and wiped her eyes. She should have seen it sooner. Yesterday, last year, the second she helped him to his feet after saving his life for the first time. He'd always been temptation embodied, and she'd always wanted to experience him, but she'd never believed him capable of anything like what he'd given her last night. She'd never seen him for what he was, rather for the mask he wore. He'd let her see him over the last few days—the wonderful side he never shared, likely for the same reasons it took her centuries to give her body to another. Neither one of them enjoyed pain.

She wanted to love him back, but she needed it to be real. It hadn't been real with Sebastian, rather the hope of something she'd never experienced. With everything that had happened in the last few days, Ava couldn't trust her feelings any more than she could trust herself. Dante deserved her honesty if nothing else, and she had no idea whether or not the feelings in her chest were love or an anxious rush from the aftermath of all that had occurred.

She just hoped he'd stick around while she tried to figure it out. Living as a human would require adjustments, and though she knew what he'd told her was true—turning her into a vampire or finding other means of immortality wasn't exactly difficult—she felt she'd learned her lesson at last. No more rushing into things, because it was the easy way out. Sebastian had been the easy way out, and he would have made her miserable in the real world. She couldn't abuse Dante's love for her, because she was terrified of what came next. When and if it came to that—to becoming a vampire, or whatever it was he thought he could do to correct her sudden mortality, it had to be for the right reasons. It had to be because she loved him.

Ava sighed, brushing a kiss against his chest. She wanted to love him. He was the most reliable friend she'd had, or would ever have. Loving him felt right.

Whether or not she could trust her instincts now was a different story.

However long they remained like that, she didn't know. Never before had she allowed herself to lie in bed as the day eroded away. Days brought assignments, and assignments kept her active. If she had finished one, another most assuredly awaited her attention. Strangely enough, Ava had never imagined what her existence would be like after retirement. It had all seemed grandiose and relaxing, but a part of her would always want to be in the thick of things. Now she was human. A seemingly ordinary woman in an extraordinary world. Granted, it wouldn't last, and she doubted Lucifer expected her to take her sentence lying down. Still the severity of the punishment both struck her as ingenious and insanely cruel. She was a woman without a social security card, birth certificate, bank account, occupation, place of residence, or a name to call herself. Beyond the humiliation of being stripped of her powers, she could concede it was a fitting punishment. Not only would her body wither and age, she would spend what little time she had left as a nobody.

Ava smiled, drawing a circle around Dante's bellybutton. One way or another...

She knew the second he awoke. His body tensed and a long, satisfied sigh escaped his lips. Ava didn't look up, but dropped a kiss across his belly in silent greeting. He touched her hair and drew it over her shoulder. How one simple motion could render her weak-kneed, lying down or not, left her perplexed but content. She'd never known simple, sensuous luxuries. Figured Dante would be the one to introduce her.

"What time is it?" he asked, his voice rough with sleep.

"Dunno."

"How long was I out?"

"Dunno."

"You're a wealth of information, aren't you?"

Ava grinned and turned. "I didn't wanna get up."

"Not complaining," Dante assured her. "You all right?"

"I'm swell."

He lifted his hips. "I'm swelling."

As though she hadn't noticed. Dante's state of perma-erect hadn't wavered at all through the night. Ava rolled her eyes and snickered, but her disobedient hand couldn't resist slipping under the covers. She hadn't explored Sebastian much during their time together, and while her nerves were still slightly strung, she was cushioned by the knowledge Dante loved her. Those weren't words he used lightly—not once during the multitudes of women he paraded past her had he assigned any sort of sentiment toward a

bedmate. She knew he loved her, because Dante never lied about the things that mattered.

And knowing he loved her gave her courage to do things she might otherwise dismiss. “You know those television ads?” Ava murmured, wrapping her hand around his cock. His answering moan and enthusiastic jerk fueled her confidence. “The ones where you might wanna see a doctor if you have an erection that lasts longer than four hours?”

“I didn’t pop any pills.”

“You might wanna see a doctor, anyway.”

Dante grinned, threading his fingers through her hair. “They’d be less concerned about my dick and more concerned with my lack of a pulse.”

“Only if they’re really good doctors.” Ava licked her lips and drew the blankets down his hips, a small gasp catching in her throat as his cock bobbed free. She had a certain sensibility when it came to sex, despite her lack of expertise, but even still she couldn’t prevent a thoroughly overused thought from wandering across her mind. He seemed so large—much too large to fit anywhere as small as her body. It seemed miraculous it hadn’t hurt to the point of actual pain. Her mortal frame seemed so damn breakable.

“Ava...”

She blinked. The near-dangerous tremor in his voice sent ripples across her skin.

“What?”

“Are you gonna stare all night or put it to good use?”

“You have any suggestions?”

Dante whimpered, his head slamming back against his pillow. “Ava, please...”

“Please what?” She needed to hear what he wanted. It was important for reasons she couldn’t explain. The words would prompt action.

“Your mouth. On me.”

“On you?”

“Great fuck, woman, suck me before I bust a nut!”

Somehow she was able to suppress her snort of laughter, her body thriving on bravado as she drew his velvety head between her lips. Dante’s answering sigh eased her worn nerves and fueled her with confidence. It seemed ridiculous asking for guidance on a blowjob, as the act was rather self-explanatory, yet she’d never tasted a man like this. Drawing him in deep felt natural, as did the soft, encouraging squeezes of her hand. He was silky and hard in all the right places.

“Ahem.”

That voice didn’t belong here. Ava’s insides flushed cold.

“I think little sister has officially slutted down her inner prude. What do you say?”

“Holy fuck!” Dante yelped, sitting up with such intensity it forced his cock deeper in her mouth. Ava grunted and fought her way up, heat blazing her cheeks, and her very human heart thundering a thousand miles a minute. In an embarrassing scuffle, she managed to cover her breasts and belatedly protect her lover’s modesty under the thin white comforter that left little to the imagination.

Not that it mattered. If their voices hadn’t been indicator enough, the canary-eating grins on her sisters’ faces were enough to betray they had seen more than a mere eyeful.

“I don’t remember ordering room service,” Dante said, his voice small and embarrassed.

“Luxi,” Ava said through gritted teeth. “Invi. Pardon my candor, but what the hell

are you two doing here?"

"Interrupting a nooner, from the looks of it," Luxi replied with a shameless grin.

Invi shrugged. As always, her shimmering white hair bounced with subtle grace with her every move. "Little late for a nooner. More like a four-thirtier."

Ava grunted incredulously. "Dante's right. Our kind never knock."

"Yeah," Dante snapped. "You guys really need to work on that."

Luxi gave him a faux-pout. "Aw, sorry, sweetie. We'll be out of your hair in no time."

"What the hell are you two even doing here?" Ava demanded. "Or haven't you heard, I'm—"

"Human," Invi said, looking bored.

"One nasty middle finger, if you ask me." Luxi perked an eyebrow. "Though honestly, little sis, what the fuck were you thinking in summoning the angel?"

"I never actually got that far."

"Yeah," Dante drawled. "And when you two toddle back to Hell, make sure you tell that bitch Brixley—"

"Pixley," supplied the three sisters.

"Whatever. Tell her next time she crosses me—"

Invi held up a hand. "Let me stop you right there, washboard."

"Washboard?" he repeated.

"Just going by the abs."

Dante scowled and hiked the blanket farther up his body.

"Aw." Luxi pouted. "You made him all self-conscious. I gotta hand it to you, Ava, this guy is so not my type, but I'd ride him like a wild bull."

The thought of her sister, or any female not bearing her name, touching her vampire supplied Ava with a healthy dose of jealous rage. "Back off, Penthouse."

"Something with Sins and name calling?" Dante asked.

"More like something with sisters," Invi replied. "Anyway, like I was saying, Pixley was just doing her job. It wasn't personal."

The vampire snickered. "Could've fooled me."

"And she could make your insides your outsides with a blink, so maybe loosen up with the empty threats."

A low growl rumbled through Dante's throat. "Who said they were empty?"

This was getting nowhere fast. "Guys!" Ava shouted. "This is all, what's the word ... mortifying, but if we could please get to the point?"

Luxi smirked. "So you can get back to..."

"Just say it!"

"Sucking his cock?"

Ava's face flamed. "Wrong *it*."

"We're here to tell you it's not over," Invi said. "Once we got word on what had happened, we appealed to Lucifer. Or rather, Luxi and Gula appealed to Lucifer, and he's decided to convene tonight for a final decision regarding your fate."

"Regarding my fate?" Ava blinked. "Do you mean—"

Invi nodded. "You could be home tonight."

"Or you could be zapped out of existence," Luxi said. "We're not sure what kinda convention we're talking about here. But I tell you, sis, you play your cards right and



Lucifer will welcome you back with open arms.”

She swallowed hard. “Just like that?”

Invi rolled her eyes. “No, not just like that. We still have the Lower Six to deal with, thanks to you. And, no offense to lover boy, but the ever-revolving door leading to your bed has all of us worried.”

The other sister frowned. “Not all of us.”

“Well, those of us who pay attention.”

“The door to my bed is not ever-revolving!” Ava snapped. “Dante is—”

“Your second in a week,” Invi noted.

“My second ever!”

“Well, going from eons of abstinence to two guys in one week doesn’t look good.”

Dante rumbled a low growl, but didn’t say anything.

“Beyond that, Ira and Perb are the wild cards,” Luxi continued. “Ace hasn’t weighed in yet, but Ira and Perb are ... well, Ira and Perb.”

Ava nodded dimly. She had never been as close with her brothers, with the exception of Gula, as she had with her sisters. Even then, though, she felt closer to Luxi. Invi could be sweet or conniving, and Ava hadn’t missed the way she deliberately left her name out of those siblings who immediately came to her defense. Nor did she miss the meaningful sneers she kept aiming in her direction.

“Dante is different,” Ava said.

“I’m sure he is,” Invi replied.

“Why don’t you back the fuck off?” the vampire in question snapped. “Don’t you have some poor soul to tempt?”

The blonde shrugged. “Not right now. All of our active assignments are on hold until this thing with Ava is decided.”

All assignments were on hold? Ava had to fight to keep her jaw from dropping. Never had Lucifer called everything to a standstill, and fuck knew there had been a lot of times when she wished he had. This wasn’t right.

Luxi tossed her a reassuring wink as though reading her thoughts. “Don’t sweat it, little sis. Lucifer has too much of a soft spot where you’re concerned. If it had been anyone else...”

Ava felt numb. She wasn’t so sure about that.

“Just don’t piss him off by being late tonight,” Invi offered a saccharine smile.

“Once the location has been decided, you’ll feel the burn. It won’t be in town. Too much chance of interruption, so you might wanna score yourself some wheels since you can’t just pop in and out at the present. And, if I might suggest...” She glanced at Dante.

“Leave lover boy here. Things are more likely to go in your favor if you don’t flaunt your ... shall we say, indiscretions?”

Ava smirked, but there was no feeling behind it. The dread she’d released earlier had soared back with a vengeance, gripping her insides. At once, she couldn’t see past tonight. She couldn’t see anything at all. Goddamn it, at least being human gave her a sense of completion. The back-and-forth of Hell would destroy her as surely as a firebolt to the heart from the man himself.

It would all end tonight, one way or another.

“Fuck that,” Dante snapped, drawing her back to herself. His gaze was locked dead on Invi, his face a mask of pure disdain. “She doesn’t go anywhere without me.”

Invi huffed. "It's your funeral, moron."

Ava bit back a genuine grin at that. It was a predictable reaction. If the last few days had taught her anything, it was Dante went where he wanted and fuck the rest. Any protests on her part would be a waste of breath. She'd try, of course, but she wouldn't get far.

Dante never thought before he spoke and thrived on bravado more than smarts, but he loved her. And knowing she'd have someone there who loved her, despite the odds, gave her courage she couldn't repay.

Luxi gave her a knowing look. "Tell him he's being stupid."

"Oh," Ava replied, "he knows. And I'll try, but I am not his keeper. Dante does what he wants."

"Fucking right he does." Dante dropped a kiss across her shoulder, his hand covering hers under the blanket. Their fingers interlaced with a reassuring squeeze. "I'll be there," he told her sisters. "You can count on it."

If she weren't so touched, she might have been annoyed. His blatant disregard for his own safety, despite what had happened over the last couple days, had yet to waver. Dante would be there for her. Right now, his support and bullheadedness was the one thing on which Ava could depend. And in the face of the uncertainty looming ahead, she found herself engulfed in warmth.

## Chapter Eleven

In the mid-nineteenth century, the area called Under the Hill represented the very worst sort of place for a woman to show her head—at least the sort of woman with a reputation to protect. What now stood as a small strip of land along the river landing had once been a large sub-community that entertained thieves, knife fights and the world's oldest profession. So sordid was the reputation of the Hill not even police would venture along its seedy path. Now in the era of tourism and family friendly entertainment, the Hill had been reduced to a string of restaurants, gift shops and a casino showboat. One walkway ended and another began just as quickly, leaving little room between establishments. It still wasn't the safest place to venture after night fell, but Natchez had far darker corners.

It was here Dante had parked the mustard-colored Oldsmobile he'd lifted off a drug trafficker in New Orleans. He usually wasn't one for petty larceny, but the second he'd learned Ava's location, he'd abandoned everything for the need to rush to her side. And until the marvelously horribly-timed visit from her sisters, he'd forgotten he had a car on hand, at all.

He was fucking glad he had it now. Ava had descended into a state of desperate panic. Such to the point even now she managed to pull ahead of him in her small, anxious strides. They hurried along in silence, passing restaurants and laughing couples and people who had no idea Hell was literally upon them.

She hadn't felt the burn, yet—the call from the other side alerting her where she needed to go. While Dante wasn't sure how it worked with humans, he knew she'd recognize the second it happened. She just wanted to be ready.

He did too. The sooner this was over with, the better.

“Ava—”

In a flash, she disappeared into the space between buildings. The next thing Dante knew, his back was against a boarded wall and her lips were on his. She bit, she hissed, she licked the inside of his mouth and whimpered when he moaned into her. In a furious, heated stroke, she'd managed to wiggle free of one pant leg, her fingers fumbling at the button of his jeans before jerking down his fly. It happened fast—god, so fast. One second gasping against her lips, the next spinning her around and driving his cock deep inside her. Her head rolled against the building side, her eyes wide and her skin damp with perspiration.

She was so beautiful.

Dante sighed, grasping her hips and anchoring her into his harsh, eager thrusts.

“Ava...”

“Just fuck me.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

It was nothing like last night. He didn't get to see or touch her, didn't get to feel her flesh beneath his fingers or marvel in the way she smiled into his kisses. This wasn't about pleasure.

“Hold on, baby,” he practically snarled, his thrusts growing harder, rougher, need lacing every inch of his body. “This is gonna be a rough ride.”

Ava buried her face in the crook of his neck and squeezed his arms. He didn't lie. He pounded her into the wall, growling things that sounded like words, stroking her clit as his balls slapped noisily against her, and swirling his hips with every thrust. She didn't scream and he didn't want her to—he wanted the illicit smacks of their coupling, the thrill of knowing any one of those conservative families might poke their head down the alley and see something they shouldn't. They rode each other, wrestling for dominance. He drove in and she smashed her hips against his, squeezing her vaginal muscles every time his cock slid inside. When she came, the cry that tore through her throat was guttural, barely human. It triggered his own orgasm and sent him spiraling down an abyss in need to catch her.

Ava looked at him as though he'd handed her the world.

Minutes, hours, centuries later, the world returned to Dante. His forehead had found purchase on her shoulder, her human heartbeat thundering his ears. He wanted to taste her again, feel her shudder around his fangs as her body tumbled toward ecstasy one more time, but he knew better. She needed her strength.

"Oh shit," Ava murmured, a giddy laugh bubbling off her lips. "That was..."

"Amazing."

"Unexpected."

"You started it."

"Yeah." She grinned, then winced as his cock slipped out of her, her feet reaching the ground. "I just... I don't know what came over me."

He smirked. "I have that effect."

"I just needed..." Ava worried a lip between her teeth. "This might be the end tonight. You don't have to come with me."

Dante favored her smugly as he tucked himself back inside his jeans. "Don't think you're losing me that easily, sweetheart." He blew her a kiss before dropping to his knees, his breath hitching when his gaze landed on her naked pussy. "You went commando and didn't tell me."

Ava squirmed. "I forgot to put something on. My underwear, that is."

"I think someone wanted a quickie."

"Someone else is an egomaniac."

He smirked and planted a wet kiss on her clit, his grin widening when she whimpered. "Hard not to be an egomaniac when you make those noises."

"Dante..."

"Seems I made a mess down here." His tongue drew a line up her wet slit. "Why don't I just—"

There really ought to be a quota on how many times a day one could be interrupted when giving or receiving oral. Dante didn't hear or see anything, but he knew in a second they weren't alone. Unfortunately, he wasn't quite in a position to duck or move away, thus he froze awkwardly, his tongue nestled between Ava's pussy lips.

"Wow," said the intruder, his voice deep and annoyingly male. "Did *not* need to see that."

Ava jumped, her hands flying to her sweats. "Oh god."

Dante fell back, landing inelegantly on his ass. "Fuck all," he muttered.

"Just tell me when I can look," said the newcomer. He was tall—taller than Dante, which annoyed him to no end. Broad-shouldered, built like a fucking football player, his

hair dark brown, his body draped in a floor-length trench coat, and his hand slapped over his eyes. It was the last detail that kept him alive and un-maimed. Anyone who just appeared in the middle of a private moment deserved to be ripped apart.

“That’d be never, asshole.” Dante turned back to Ava, whose face practically burned red. “Seriously. If you get your job back, the first order of business needs to be a meeting on not sneaking up on people.”

“Wouldn’t matter, anyway.” Ava’s shaking fingers managed to tie the drawstring on her sweats. He hadn’t even noticed she had a drawstring. “Dante, this is—”

The intruder’s hand dropped from his face. “Hi, Ava.”

“Sebastian.”

In the coming days, Dante wouldn’t remember getting up. He wouldn’t remember snarling, either, or feeling his fangs slide into his mouth. He certainly wouldn’t remember reaching back to last Thursday to land a punch in the angel’s eye. It all happened too fast for the mind to comprehend. He just knew it felt fucking fantastic—almost as fantastic as watching the enormous mass stumble back and crash to the ground in a daze.

“Son of a cherub!” Sebastian cried. “What the hell was that for?”

“You stay the *fuck* away from her, you hear?”

Sebastian’s wide, puppy-wounded gaze landed on Ava. “Who is this and why did he hit me?”

“Dante,” Ava said, her voice still shaking. At least this time it was from laughter. “He’s a ... really good friend.”

“I can see that.”

Dante snarled and marched forward, seizing Sebastian by the lapels of his stupid Matrix coat and dragging him off the ground. “I’m the man who loves her,” he spat. “So unless you’re here to pass out leaflets, I suggest you hop into the first taxi back home.”

Sebastian made a face. “Look,” he said, wrenching himself free of Dante’s grasp. “I’m not here for any reason aside from the fact that I heard Ava was trying to contact me.”

“Was. As in the past tense. As in get the fuck out.”

“Oh,” Ava said, her voice terse. “How sweet. You heard I was trying to get a hold of you and you, what, decided to make things easy for me? That doesn’t really match the memory of the guy who bolted upward while I was signing over my own death warrant, because he thought I’d bewitched him.”

Sebastian’s hands came up. “In all fairness, I didn’t know that would happen.”

Ava laughed humorlessly. “But you’ve obviously found out.”

“Well ... yeah.”

“And the second news reached your ears you rushed to my side and cleared everything up, right?”

He scowled. “Don’t be like that.”

“Like what?” Ava demanded. “Like a girl who’s going to her own funeral over some asshole with wings who used me, lied to me and ran off without even so much as a ‘thank you, ma’am’? You arrogant son of a bitch.”

Sebastian’s expression darkened. “Like you had nothing to do with it.”

Dante growled and shoved him back. “You look at her like that again, and I’ll tear your face off. Do they let faceless angels into Paradise?”

The angel ignored him, his gaze remaining on the woman. “You’re a Sin, Ava!”

“Great,” she muttered. “So everyone knows.”

“And you were trying to corrupt me.”

Another growl tore through the air, but this one wasn't Dante's. In a heartbeat, she had pressed past him, her own fist seemingly eager to feel the sting of Sebastian's flesh. “Didn't have to try very hard, did I?” she screamed, dragging her hand back to hit him again. “You bastard!”

“Ow!” Sebastian scowled up at her. “I'm here to help!”

“Could've.” *Smack.* “Fooled.” *Punch.* “Me!”

Dante heaved deep, unneeded gulps of air, his anger melting into amusement. Funny how one little act could put things in perspective. Ava, with her human skin, human hands and human heart, had tackled an angel and was currently beating him hard enough that any regular person would require reconstructive surgery. His own animosity fell into a calmer general dislike, and while he would never offer Sebastian a hand, he likewise felt no need to add to the angel's bruises.

He knew when Ava's mortality kicked in, for her blows became less about force and more about resilience. Dante swallowed and came up behind her, closing his hands around her arms and kissing her shoulder. “It's all right, sweetheart,” he murmured. “I think you got him.”

She trembled against him. “I want to pull his wings out feather by feather.”

Sebastian paled at that, but didn't move. Angels, like most other demons, appeared human until the time came to unveil themselves, much like a vampire's fangs remained concealed until they needed to feed. Their wings would then spawn between their shoulder blades, spanning anywhere from five to fifteen feet in length. Dante had never seen an angel reveal himself before and knew he wouldn't now. At least not tonight.

Not with the fear on Sebastian's face.

“Look,” the angel said slowly. “I didn't come here to... I dunno...”

“Piss me off?” Ava volunteered. “Oh, honey. You're a little late if that wasn't your intention.”

“So I gathered.”

“And if this is your way of wooing me back, I gotta say you better work on your technique.”

Dante smirked and wrapped his arms around Ava's waist, hooking his chin over her shoulder. “As you can see, she's moved on to bigger and better things.”

Sebastian scowled. “You're not bigger than me.”

“Am where it counts, friend.”

Dante felt Ava's smile more than he saw it. “So,” she said, “why the hell are you here then?”

“I told you. I'm here to help.”

Ava snickered. “Yeah. Good luck with that.”

“Big J told me what's about to go down,” Sebastian said. “I thought I could appeal to Lucifer on your behalf.”

“You're joking, right?” Ava turned her face toward Dante. “Is he joking?”

“I don't know the prick as well as you do,” he replied. “Unless this is how he is always. If that's the case, sweetheart, I think you and I need to have a serious talk about your taste in men.”

“I dunno. I think my taste has increased considerably over the last week.”

Dante nipped her ear with his teeth. "You can say that again."

"Is it really quite necessary for you two to do this in front of me?" Sebastian winced and climbed to his feet. "It's kinda childish."

"And leaving me a Dear Jane letter wasn't childish?" Ava retorted.

"It was cowardly," Dante volunteered. "Think most kids aren't too cowardly."

"Look," Sebastian said. "I didn't come here to kiss ass or apologize or watch you two make like horny teenagers. I came here to help."

Ava tensed. "Did you really just say *not* apologize?"

"Well, of course I apologize! I—"

"That's not what you just said."

"If you would actually let me finish a sentence—"

"You've finished several," Dante said, squeezing Ava again and doing his damndest to keep the smirk off his face. It was a futile effort. This couldn't have gone better for him if he'd handed out stage directions. "Just not saying the right things."

Sebastian glared at him. "You could shut up, you know. No one would complain."

"You really want to take that tone with my boyfriend?" Ava snapped, seemingly unaware of herself now. "Really? After what *you* did, you want to take that tone?"

In a matter of minutes, her anxiety had evaporated, replaced by righteous anger and fueled by words Dante figured she'd wanted to get off her chest for a week. It didn't matter at the moment that her fate would be decided before the sun rose in the morning. All that mattered was saying her piece and being done with it. He'd never imagined getting a front row seat, but for how outrageously giddy it made him, he'd be damned before he said a word.

Plus, she'd just called him her boyfriend. It seemed such a juvenile term for what he felt for her and what they meant to each other, but fuck, he'd take it. He'd take being her anything right now.

For his part, Sebastian seemed content with digging his own grave. "He's ridiculous, Ava! I knew you'd rebound, but I thought you'd at least have some dignity about it."

Dante was prepared this time. He tightened his arms around her waist, holding her back when she attempted to lunge again. "It's a shame you two kids couldn't work out your differences," he sneered. "Seems you have one of those special bonds that only happen every hundred years or so. And you threw it all away."

Sebastian shook his head, ignoring him. "I want to talk to Lucifer. I can get this whole mess settled for you."

"Wow," Ava spat, "are *you* stupid."

"I didn't tell Big J about you being a Sin."

She laughed dryly. "Of course you didn't. Of course."

"Ava—"

"You know, I knew you were a heartless prick the second I got back from the aforementioned signing of my death warrant, but damn it, Sebastian, I thought you cared for me enough not to throw me into the lion's den." Ava stilled in Dante's arms, her body trembling. "I can't help it if you suddenly grew a conscience, but sorry, I have to go have my ass handed to me by the Prince of Lies."

"I didn't tell Big J *anything*," Sebastian yelped. "I swear it!"

"Then how—"

"A demon told me."

Ava tensed again. "What?"

"Some demon." Sebastian waved a hand. "You'd gone to Hell to resign, and a demon approached me. Some ... I dunno, freak in a cloak. I didn't see his face."

Dante's arms fell slack at that, allowing Ava just enough space to draw away and see his astounded gaze. He felt pulled back without warning. Two days ago, he'd stood on the lawn of an antebellum home, the air full of wind and the indiscernible language of a creature he'd never before encountered. A creature dressed like the Grim Reaper who wanted Ava's job. Surely the description didn't apply to just one demon, but at the moment there was a single name on his mind, and he'd bet the house Ava thought the same thing.

"This freak in a cloak," Dante said. "He talk in any language you'd ever heard?"

"It wasn't an Earth language, if that's what you mean. He told me what Ava was, and I..." He swallowed. "I couldn't handle it. Pure sin..."

"Mammon." Ava hardened with what he assumed was rage. "Son of a whore."

Sebastian frowned. "Hey!"

"Not you, jackass. Mammon. It's..." Ava twisted in Dante's arms. "That's it."

"What's it?"

"Mammon. That's why ... fuck, I'm such an idiot."

He just looked at her. "You're still a step ahead of me, if that makes any difference."

"They've just been waiting for a chance like this," she said, pushing forward as though he hadn't spoken. "The Lower Six have. They've wanted in so badly they would've done anything to get close to Lucifer. Poisoning my relationship with my siblings and causing doubt... This was what he wanted."

Dante's stomach twisted unpleasantly. "Doesn't explain why your white knight shot skyward, does it? It's not like he didn't know you were from Hell."

"I just found out she was a Sin!" Sebastian replied. "For all I knew, I was another mission to her. What was I supposed to do?"

Ava's head whipped around, glaring daggers. "Another mission?"

"Obviously, I was wrong."

"Obviously." If it were possible to load a word with venom, Sebastian would have fallen dead with as much as Ava packed into four little syllables. "You took the word of some anonymous demon over me. I don't know what that makes you, but it's synonymous with the words 'gullible' and 'asswipe'."

"He knew things."

She snickered. "They always do."

"Look," Sebastian said shortly. "It killed me to leave the way I did, but the thought that you had used me killed me even more. I couldn't take that chance, Ava. Not for anything. Not even you. I'm sorry."

"Apology *not* accepted, but thanks, anyway."

A long silence settled between them, during which Dante and Sebastian traded venomous glares. Then Ava exhaled heavily, her shoulders dropping as though relieving a heavy load. She remained in Dante's arms, but the hold wasn't as tight as it had been, and he didn't know whether or not to pull her closer.

It was certainly a new experience, shifting emotions so radically within such a limited time span. Anger had fueled him just a few minutes earlier, then amusement and admiration, and finally acceptance. Now everything felt different again. If Sebastian were



to be taken at his word, it opened up a whole new set of possibilities. The angel clearly harbored feelings for Ava—nothing could eradicate something powerful enough to forgo Heaven within the span of a few days. And despite everything Ava had told him—her feelings for Sebastian embodying more a need for freedom than actual love—the tension they shared remained thick for a reason.

The familiar boil of jealousy ached once more.

Shit, everything was so confused. Dante sighed wearily, looking at the pavement. He couldn't lose her to this asshole. Not now. Not with everything between them. Not with what they'd shared last night and most of the day. Not now that he knew how it felt to wake up with her in his arms.

"You didn't tell Big J anything," Ava said at last. "And you're willing to tell Lucifer that?"

"Yes." Sebastian's reply was immediate.

"They're convening tonight."

"I know. That's why I came."

"How charitable," Dante drawled. Ava favored him with a warning glance, but he couldn't help himself. He rarely could where she was concerned—not before and certainly not now. Not when he had so much to lose.

"Thanks," Ava said, turning back to Sebastian. Her tone lacked warmth or substance, but the word burned all the same.

In a flash, she whirled back around to Dante, and her lips were on his. Hot. Smoldering. Needful.

*Mine.* Dante growled and pulled her close, encouraged and desperate for her taste. He would have kissed her forever if she allowed it. "I love you," he told her.

"I know," she replied.

And though he felt her sincerity, he wanted the words in turn. He needed them now. He needed to know she was his.

## Chapter Twelve

Ava had never witnessed paint dry or put much stock into the old adage about watched pots never boil, but sitting in the Oldsmobile, waiting for her inner alarm to blare had her strung out on more anxiety than her human body could manage. She kept wiggling in her seat, her attention shifting from the clusters of people vacating the restaurants and the drunks stumbling off the river boat. In the driver's seat, Dante barely twitched, and his odd cold shoulder did little to improve her apprehension. For the third time in two minutes, she questioned the wisdom of turning down Sebastian's offer to sit with them rather than materialize once a location had been announced. For the third time in two minutes, her mind immediately provided the obvious answer.

She didn't want to aggravate the situation with Dante any more than she already had, even if she didn't know how she'd managed to upset him. Sebastian's presence wasn't entirely welcome, but at the very least, he could offer testimony on her behalf. Exactly how beneficial said testimony would be was a different question, but some help was better than no help.

"Come on, already," Ava muttered. Dante didn't budge. "I'm not even sure how this is supposed to work." She pinched her skin experimentally, as though pressure would hasten the process. "Human bodies are a complete mystery to me."

Dante peered outside the driver's side window, though there was nothing to look at.

"Oh my god, that man just set himself on fire." He cracked at that and threw her a narrow glance. "Made you look," Ava said.

"Funny."

"Oh, he speaks!" She slapped a hand across her chest. "Be still my beating heart."

"That what this is then? A joke to you?"

From where that remark had originated completely baffled her, and since she was in no way prepared for it, the most she could offer in return was a blank stare.

Dante snickered and shook his head. "You think those words are easy for me to say? Fuck knows I knew what I was getting into whenever I decided to come after you, but honestly—"

"You know, an indication of any kind as to what you're talking about would go miles into clearing things up for me."

"You still have feelings for him."

Ava's nose wrinkled. "For who?"

"Don't give me that."

"You mean Sebastian?" She stared at him for a long, vacant moment before choking a laugh. "Get real."

"You wouldn't be so damn upset with him if you didn't."

"No, of course that makes sense. The only reason I'd be angry at all with Sebastian, the guy who abandoned me and took a demon's word above mine, is if I still carried a torch for him. Logic, look into it." Ava crossed her arms and slid down in her seat, feeling every bit the part of a pouting teenager, but she wasn't in the mood for lectures on how to behave around exes. The climate was already tense enough.

"This isn't a joke to me," Dante snapped. "I love you."

Ava's heart did that annoying fluttery thing again. Every time those words rolled off his lips, her body reacted in ways she couldn't describe. Still lovely as the sensation was, she didn't want to have it right now. "Have I given you the impression anything about you and me is a joke?" she asked instead.

"You haven't given me much of an impression, at all."

At that, the fluttering feeling vanished, replaced with irritation that was not aided by her anxiety. She sat up with intent. "Well, shit, Dante. It's just my life on the line. So sorry I wasn't in tune to your desperate need for an ego boost."

"I don't need a fucking ego boost."

"Then what is it?"

"I need you."

She gestured emphatically. "I'm right here!"

"No, you're not. You say you are, but you're not." Dante huffed and turned his gaze again toward the casino boat. "You're not mad that he left you alone to face the hounds of Hell, sweetheart. You're mad that he left you, at all."

"How is that not the same thing?"

Dante fell silent for a long beat before releasing the sort of sigh a man released upon catching a bullet with his chest. The sort that forwent tension for the sake of grim resignation. "Because if he hadn't left you, you'd be with him now," he said softly. "You wouldn't be with me, at all."

Strange how clear two little sentences could make a foggy night. At once, the scattered pieces lying around her mind found the place where they belonged, and she found herself feeling like a prized idiot. Ava licked her lips. "Dante—"

"No, I get it."

"You really don't."

"Oh no?"

"If Sebastian wants me back ... well ... let's just say, it'll be one hell of a funny conversation from my end." She looked at him a moment before breaking away and slumping again in her seat. "I'm not sure if it's a woman thing or an Ava thing, to be honest ... but I can be angry for many reasons. Right now, I'm pissed about what he did to me, not because he left. And maybe that's strange, but I don't want him back, Dante. I don't want him, at all."

He stiffened and sighed. "I know."

"You do? Then what—"

"I'm dangling here. I know what *I* want, and it's you, baby." Dante turned to face her, his gaze locking with hers. She had no idea if she'd ever get used to this side of the vampire—naked vulnerability was one thing, but the complete devotion he threw at her feet seemed too large to touch or understand. Those looks he gave her, the ones baring all of himself at her disposal, as though she were the reason behind every breath he stole, needed or not, left her shaking with uncertainty.

How had he kept this from her? Feelings like his didn't just spawn overnight. He might have wanted her for centuries, might have yearned for a deeper connection than the one they shared, but love like this didn't just happen.

He deserved nothing less than her entire self should she label the confusing swarm of feelings she held for him as love.

The realization was a shotgun blast to the chest, and in her state of confused unrest,

had her eyes welling with tears. Fuck, she hated crying. It never solved anything, but she couldn't help herself—nor could she help the strange turnabout that was the less she wanted to cry, the more her body demanded it. Ava would have loved to blame it on her human hormones, but she didn't think it worked that way.

Dante deserved everything she had for all he'd given her. Yet she wouldn't hasten to identify her feelings. It wasn't fair to her, and it certainly wasn't fair to him. Should this pass, should Lucifer show mercy, she didn't want to realize after the storm had passed that the feelings she had weren't love. The only thing worse than denying Dante what he yearned to hear would be giving it to him only to take it back. She wouldn't do that.

"I can't give you what you want," Ava said at last, sniffing miserably. "The most I can... I have feelings for you. As in *much*. And it's so different from anything I've ever felt." She paused. "It's real. It feels ... real. Sebastian never felt real. And I decided I loved him too quickly, because it was convenient for me. It gave me an excuse to escape, like in a fairytale or something. But I don't want to decide I love you. If it happens, I want it to be real too. As real as whatever we have now. If I decide I love you, like I decided with him, it becomes a fairytale, and we can't be a fairytale, Dante. I haven't had anything beyond the fairytale before. Everything you and I have had has been real. Everything we've done ... and it has to stay that way. The feelings I have for you are real too. And powerful. I just don't know if I can call it love. I've known you forever, but I only *saw* you a couple days ago." A watery smile traced her lips. "Give me time?"

Dante stared at her, seemingly awed into silence. "Ava..."

"I know that it's not what you want—"

"It's perfect." At once, he reached across the seat, cupping her cheeks and drawing her mouth against his. Fuck, he tasted good, and she treasured every sinful stroke of his tongue. Every time he whimpered and pressed himself closer. She loved this, she really did. Before Dante the notion of need had never been real. It was now, and she couldn't wait to explore what happened in the calm.

"Perfect?" Ava asked when they pulled apart. "Really?"

"God, yes." Dante sighed, resting his brow against hers. "Thank you."

"Mmm ... for what?"

"Giving me this." He kissed her again before drawing away with finality. "There's more. Sorry I was such an ass. I just needed ... something. I love you and I needed—"

Ava smiled. "I know. I'm no good at this."

"We make quite the pair."

"Always have."

This was what she needed. Beyond the quick fuck in the alley, beyond the sweet satisfaction of bruising Sebastian's angelic face, she needed this sense of absolution to push onward. Having Dante at her side gave her strength.

Thus when the familiar burn tickled her insides, she felt nervous but not afraid.

One way or another, it would be over soon.

\* \* \* \*

Undoubtedly, the remains had once been grand, though age had worn them to nothing more than another tourist attraction. Yet unlike the antebellum homes in Natchez, the Ruins of Whytecliff stood at least thirty miles down Highway 60 and off two other country roads. It was the sort of thing one had to be looking for in order to find, though

even in the dead of night with her human eyes, Ava saw.

Whytecliff had undoubtedly been palatial before falling to time. The pillars stood straggled between each other, marking where a house once stood. Large, gothic columns scarred by flame and aged with unkind winds and rain blocked off a small piece of grass. It was large and beautiful, and it might be the last ground upon which she stood.

Yes, this certainly was the place to convene. Far enough from civilization to avoid attention while maintaining an ethereal, almost royal presence. Ava shivered as Dante helped her over the small fence marking the stopping point for tourists. The area hummed with energy almost to the point of suffocation, but she didn't see anyone.

"Maybe the party ended early," Dante murmured.

"Don't think so."

Ava turned around, her steps stumbling backward. Then her gaze scaled up the columns, and she saw them. Situated upon each pillar stood a member of her family—all of them—with Lucifer in the center. A strangled gasp clawed free of her throat, her hand seizing Dante's with a powerful squeeze.

At once she was all too aware of her mortality. She had no powers, no shields, no defenses of any kind. She had nothing but the beats of her incredibly human heart and the hard, tremulous breaths rocking her chest. How unreal that only a day had passed since she'd fallen into bed with Dante—since she'd released her inhibitions. Now she stood miles from the cold comfort of her rented room with her vampire, her incredibly wonderful, foolish vampire, at her side.

"Well," Dante said. "Guess we have an audience then."

Ava didn't budge. Her focus was locked on Lucifer who merely looked back. She'd never been on the receiving end of his stare. The Lucifer she knew was all smiles, corny jokes, at times killer sarcasm, and someone she respected as a boss and viewed as a friend. Not a close friend, granted, but a friend nonetheless. This Lucifer was one she'd seen in action, but never like this. The cold stare was enough to render anyone insane. She knew. She'd seen it happen.

On the surface, Lucifer was no different than any other demon. He was reasonably tall, his build much like Dante's in his wiry, muscular frame rather than bulging Schwarzenegger biceps. Wavy chocolate-colored hair topped his head, his eyes a warm hazel unless he was angry, at which point they burned red. He had high cheekbones and sensuous lips, and almost always wore a finely-tailored suit. At will, he could produce two very small but noticeable horns from his crown, but only did so at parties. He loved the stereotype, loved mocking it. Typically, if he sported horns, it was a sign he was in a good mood. Though she stood a hundred feet below him, Ava could tell his horns were not out tonight.

Then Lucifer smiled, and the chill in her blood grew colder. "Don't look so nervous, Avaritia," he said. "We are all friends here." His tone, soft as it was, made the ground rumble.

Ava licked her lips and swallowed her bravado. "Who's nervous?"

Lucifer chuckled, glancing down the length of the column. "All right, gentlemen. You may show yourselves."

She didn't even bother asking to whom he spoke. The shadows between the pillars rippled and materialized, a member of the Lower Six occupying each space. A surge of pure panic iced her blood. The Binsfeld Brigade never congregated with the Sins. Never.

There was too much hostility, too much bickering, and things simply didn't get done.

Tonight was different.

*Oh holy fuck.* Ava released a steady breath, her attention jumping from face to face. Asmodeus, Leviathan, Beelzebub, Amon, Belphegor, and Mammon. Her six least favorite demons in this dimension or any other. Shit, this was not good.

"Where's the angel?" Dante murmured, squeezing her hand and bringing her back to herself.

"I sent him away," Lucifer said loudly, dissuading any notion that whispers were private. He grinned and stepped off the column, floating gracefully to the ground. Ava thought being at eye-level with her former boss would make things easier, but if anything she felt claustrophobic. Her feet demanded to run, but she managed to ignore them.

There was only one shot at this ... whatever this was.

"It's all right, Ava," said the Prince of Lies. "Sebastian did show up as he promised you. He explained everything."

"Everything?" She hated the uncertainty in her voice. "I see."

"He did seem rather eager to head home. And he had one nasty shiner." Lucifer's grin widened. "That was you, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"And me," Dante said with idiotic bravado.

Ava nodded. "And Dante."

"We took turns beating him up."

Lucifer turned to the vampire. "So this is your lover. The current one, I should say. He does seem to be a bit of an improvement over the other."

"If you'll let me explain—"

He held up a hand, his eyes sparkling red. "There is no need for explanations, Ava. Sebastian put everything as clearly as he could. He told me about Mammon, there. About how you did not betray the nature of your secret, and how he did, in fact, keep silent on the matter upon returning home."

Ava swallowed. "Yeah?"

Lucifer's smirk fell at that, as though apologetic for events he could not control. "I did not want it to come to this."

"Come to what?" Dante demanded. "You just said it yourself, she didn't break any rules!"

"Dante!" Ava hissed.

Lucifer inclined his head. "No, she did not. Not where Sebastian was concerned, at the very least. You, however, were a horse of a different color, weren't you?" His attention turned back to Ava. "You were on the run and what do you do? Spill to the first demon who will listen."

Panic began to melt into desperation. "It wasn't like that."

"Of course it wasn't."

"Dante and I have known each other for centuries."

"Yes, I am aware." Lucifer stared at her for a long beat before sighing and looking at the ground. "You were my favorite, you know. Greed always was my vice. However, bearing everything that has happened over the last few days ... the security breach, the attempt to contact the angel while your actions were under review, the careless manner in which you regarded the sensitive nature of your ... well, nature. Were it but one

infraction, I would gladly overlook it. This is the making of a disturbing pattern.”

“Pattern?” Ava repeated numbly. “There is no pattern!”

“Who the fuck am I gonna blab to?” Dante screamed. “Not exactly on Heaven’s invite list here!”

Lucifer waved dismissively. “That is irrelevant. And you can stop looking so anxious, Ava, I’m not going to kill you.”

She paused. “You’re not?”

“Of course not. However, your punishment will be considerable. First of all...” He looked again to Dante. “The vampire dies.”

“No.” The word was immediate, desperate, a reflex she couldn’t help. Dante couldn’t die for something in which he had no part. Shit, she’d predicted this. Why in the world hadn’t she just forced him to leave her be when she had the power?

*You didn’t know you loved him then.* The realization hit her so fast she barely had time to breathe, much less recover. Lucifer spoke again before she had time to process it.

“Or you may keep him alive. Granted, you would never be able to see him again, and all his memories of you would be eradicated.”

“Bullshit,” Dante snarled, though there was now a panicked edge to his voice as well. “You can’t keep me from her. I don’t give a fuck who you are.”

Lucifer smiled unpleasantly. “Charming.”

“Fine, yes,” Ava said hurriedly. Pain exploded in her chest, pressing down with such force it was a wonder she could breathe, at all. Her legs wobbled and threatened to give way, but she wouldn’t blink. She just had to get Dante out of here alive.

She felt his astonished stare, but she couldn’t look at him, else she would have fallen to her knees. Thankfully he didn’t speak. Words seemed useless.

“And you must serve a sentence of two thousand years.”

Ava nodded again, not hearing the terms and not particularly caring. All that mattered was Dante.

“You will not be short on company,” Lucifer assured her. “Your place will be within Mammon’s collection box, as he will take your place in the interim on a trial basis.”

At last, Dante spoke. His voice was barely recognizable, but even still, she would know it anywhere. “Ava...”

“Fine. Yes. Whatever.”

Lucifer neared her then and brushed a tender kiss across her forehead. Her skin burned on contact. “You’re a good girl, Ava,” he said. “This is very hard on me.” Then he stepped back and signaled for Mammon to step forward. Ava stood dumbly, barely aware of her surroundings.

It was the last time she’d see Dante. *I love him.* It seemed a cruel revelation to have at such a time, but life was like that in its infinite wisdom. And even knowing he wouldn’t remember her, she knew she couldn’t let the words escape.

She couldn’t tell him like this.

So instead, she focused her thoughts on last night, on the warmth of his kisses and the sweet bliss of his body. How he drew her hair from her face and gently stroked her skin as she slept. How he whispered he loved her that morning, and how she’d lacked the courage to love him back.

Mammon stood before her with his collection box at the ready. So this part was first. Good. She preferred it that way.

At the very least, her last memory of Dante wouldn't be tarnished by his not knowing her.



## Chapter Thirteen

The world seemed a different place, as though the line separating reality and the hellhole into which he'd tumbled sat on the other side of the fence. Dante's body refused to move. Ava stood trembling just a few feet away, her back to him. She wouldn't even look—wouldn't give him one last glimpse of her face before everything vanished. Before she became little more than a forgotten dream.

She hadn't fought. Why hadn't she fought?

Dante turned to Lucifer and felt himself harden with fury, which provided courage the best whisky couldn't surpass. "You can't take her away from me."

"Can't I?"

Ava's voice tickled the air. "Dante—"

"She already made up her mind," Lucifer said calmly. "In any regard, it won't matter in a few seconds. You'll walk from here a free man with no memory of what transpired."

The words sliced his gut, but Dante didn't feel pain. He didn't feel anything. White flashed before him and he saw a thousand different things. A woman with deep red hair standing over his beaten face, offering a hand where he expected a sword. Ava rolling her eyes when he pushed open a tavern door, his only objective finding her. Ava laughing as he wiped demon blood off his hands. Ava making a face at whatever lame pun had rolled off his lips. Ava socking him whenever he didn't know when to leave well and good alone. Ava smiling. Ava crying. Ava falling asleep in his arms. Ava's lips caressing his. Ava's flesh bare for his explorations. Telling Ava he loved her, and the look she'd given him as she peeled her tee off her body.

So much of who he was had been built along with her. In many ways, he'd been a child when they met. Reckless and immature, and completely unaware of how one person could warp his life with so little effort. Taking her memory away was worse than death.

It would erase him entirely.

Still he felt helpless once it began. The familiar, cloaked figure of Mammon drifted toward him, his skeletal hands cradling the collection box. The place where he kept his pet demons, and where Ava would spend the next two millennia. Strange how something could happen a thousand times before it obtained any sort of appreciation. Dante was no stranger to the mysteries of time—how minutes could last years or fly by in milliseconds. Watching Mammon move forward was a strange marriage of the two. It happened slowly, dragging along his torment, yet fast, much too fast. Ava would vanish and then Dante would be no more.

Something within him snapped. No, that couldn't happen.

Dante didn't feel his feet moving, didn't realize he'd broken into a run until the space separating him from the demon was nearly closed. "Hello," he said to Mammon before throwing a mean punch into the demon's jaw. "Fucker."

Ava screamed his name again and again, but he couldn't respond. His attention remained with the collection box.

Dante wasn't a fool. This was little more than a diversion. Facing Ava wouldn't change anything. Lucifer could wipe them all out with a wave of his hand, one way or another the collection box would receive a victim tonight.

It just sure as fuck wouldn't be Ava.

"Well," Lucifer drawled from a distance. "This is a rather surprising turn of events."

Dante snarled. "Fucker," he said again, punching Mammon to the ground once more before jerking the collection box into his grasp.

"Dante, no!"

He turned on his heel, his gaze clashing with Ava's one last time. "Never say I never did anything for you, sweetheart!" Then blowing her a kiss, he opened the box.

It seemed different than the other night. He didn't remember light pouring from the inside, but now it sliced the night in half. A familiar burn laced his belly, a need to be a part of something he couldn't name. The same had happened that night at Longbourne. He'd felt this—this sense of urgency and belonging, this desperation to join the others inside Mammon's collection of thieves. His skin pulled toward the box with finality. Yes, yes. This was right.

Ava would walk. His memories of her would survive. Small price to pay, two thousand years. Dante fought against the tide to face her one last time as the world faded.

He would carry her with him for always.

\*

Cold air stung her skin and wind whipped her face, but Ava didn't take any notice. She didn't even notice the ground vanish from beneath until her leg crashed into Mammon's side. Power crackled and surged, racing through her tired body and renewing her with energy she barely felt. It was intuitive. The second Mammon crashed to the ground, she raised her hands to blast him to kingdom come.

In that second, it didn't matter she was human. It didn't even register. Nothing could eradicate instinct.

Therefore, it took her a few seconds to realize her power had returned. When red ropes of electricity spawned between her hands without resistance, she aimed without pause, and Mammon screamed. Mammon screamed like he'd never experienced agony, and Ava fed him more. Smoke rose from his cooking body, and she refused to waver. She bore no mercy.

How long it took to realize she was no longer human seemed a world between. Slowly she returned to herself, standing in the middle of aged columns as her family watched her destroy the demon who would take her place. Ava's eyes widened, but she didn't lower her arms. Instead, she said, "Oh, holy shit."

"Ava!"

She whirled around just in time to catch the end of the show. The collection box had illuminated in a brilliant flash of color, spiraling upward as the earth beneath it began to tremble. A symphony of a thousand shrieks molding into one burst through the air. Symbols carved into the wood burned and sparked to life—a pillar of pure energy burst through the top and broke clear into the night sky. The blaze was blinding, blinking iron dark away with nothing but pure white. And she couldn't see. Everything faded away and she couldn't see.

"Dante!" If he responded, she didn't hear. She couldn't hear over the thunder of a thousand demons bursting to newfound freedom in a world reborn. "Dante!" Ava stumbled forward awkwardly, Mammon forgotten. "Dante!"

As quickly as it had started, it ended. The world fell still again. Dark. Silent. Secure. It took several seconds for her ears to stop ringing. Even longer for her vision to adjust

once more. Her skin pricked and her body hummed, and with every twist of her head, she expected another wail. Another demonic scream. The full pressure of evils unknown to this world still scratching at the air around them. Everything fell quiet. Fell still. Everything just fell.

"You have done well," Lucifer said, but she barely heard him. Instead, she watched the dark piece itself together again.

Then she saw him.

"Dante!" Her legs wobbled, but she forced them to work, stumbling hard against the uneven terrain. He seemed a thousand miles away in that second. "Oh god, you idiot," Ava cried, nearly toppling over again. She couldn't seem to get this gravity thing down. "I told you! I told you not to ... and what do you do?"

He lay on his stomach just a few feet from the ruins, the collection box having tumbled from his grasp after he fell. It rested uselessly on its side, lid swinging off its hinge, the contents spilled and gone. But it was the last thing she saw—her attention was entangled in Dante.

"Ava."

Lucifer's voice drew her back then. She wanted to rip him apart, but didn't dare. Mammon was a lower demon. Lucifer could kill her with a blink if he felt so inclined. Still such things barely mattered now.

Thus, in spite of her better judgment, she heard herself spit, "You lousy son of a bitch."

Lucifer shrugged. "I suppose I deserved that."

"Suppose? After the loyal servant I've been to you... I wanted for one time in my goddamned existence and this is what I get?" Ava crashed to her knees, terrible, raucous sobs coursing through her worn body. "Mammon is the one who betrayed you and *you knew it!*"

"I did," Lucifer agreed.

"You—"

"Avaritia, your powers have been returned to you." He grinned like a proud father. "Really, this whole thing ... it got blown a little out of proportion, but you did what Luxuria said you would do."

Ava barely heard a word, yet mention of her sister had her looking to the pillar where she'd stood just minutes ago. Her siblings had vanished, as had the remaining five Binsfeld demons. Likewise, the spot of grass where she'd left Mammon's smoking cadaver sat vacant. The Ruins of Whytecliff were deserted, save her, the man she loved and the Prince of Lies.

"Luxi," Ava said, frowning and fighting again to her feet. "Luxi said what? Where is she? Where are—"

Lucifer held up a hand. "My dear, it's very easy to explain."

"Then start explaining, goddamn it."

"Well, where to start?" He shrugged. "I suppose we should begin with Sebastian. The angel always rubbed me the wrong way, but, as you said, you have always been a very loyal servant. His betrayal stung us both in that regard. I've always wanted the best for you."

Ava crossed her arms and nodded, though the words had yet to mean anything. All that mattered was Dante, and he hadn't moved.

“I was concerned, albeit not too greatly, therefore I allowed rumors to circulate that you were in deeper trouble, and I didn’t outright dismiss the complaints raised by the Lower Six.”

She blinked at that. “What?”

He made a face. “Oh please. Give an old man a little credit. Those buffoons are nothing more than egomaniacal nothings that still haven’t gotten over their fifteen minutes.”

While not the strangest thing that had ever occurred, listening to her boss verbalize the very sentiment she and the others hadn’t been brave enough to express in centuries definitely made her top five list. Ava’s mouth fell open, her mind racing to scramble together puzzle pieces that had matched just seconds ago. “I ... but they think they’re ... they think they’re—”

“Important is the word you’re searching for, and yes. They do believe they’re important.” He shrugged again. “They’re not.”

“But you let them think they are. You let them think they could do our jobs! Fuck, you encourage it!”

“Well, of course I do. I enjoy the attention. Pride, after all, is the one sin ascribed to me that has yet to be disproven.” Lucifer looked at her pointedly. “It also helped keeping your lot in line, didn’t it? Whipped you into shape thinking you’d be replaced. I’m sorry, Avaritia, but it’s my house and my rules. My rules pretty much are I do whatever pleases me until it becomes tiresome.”

“But Dante—”

“We’ll get there in a minute.”

Her temper spiked but she held her tongue. At this rate, nothing could be made worse by listening to the devil talk.

“As I said, I wasn’t too concerned with your first indiscretion. After all, you have been a very good girl for a very long time. It was only a matter of waiting before you reached maturity.”

Ava winced but didn’t object. Though she hated the terminology, she had to concede greed had been her initial motivation. Desire for something she couldn’t touch, and an insane will to grasp what she’d spent centuries admiring. She’d convinced herself she was in love with a buffoon to get there. She’d convinced herself of so many things.

Lucifer waved dismissively. “Your first infraction? I let you sweat it out a bit, but I wasn’t concerned. No, it wasn’t until you told your boy there that you were a Sin that I truly began to doubt your dedication.”

“That was a mistake!”

“Yes,” he agreed, “and the Avaritia of five hundred years ago would never have allowed it to occur at all, especially when you were so concerned about what I might do to you for the first transgression. Furthermore, you didn’t hold your tongue. You explained everything, sparing no details. No, you were slipping. I knew it then.”

She protested again but fell silent. There seemed no good counter to his argument.

“I decided to allow one more violation before taking action. That came, of course, when—”

“Pixley.”

He nodded. “Yes.”

“But I wasn’t... I was just trying to—”

“Summon the very angel who had instigated this whole mess, without first seeking counsel from me or your siblings.”

Ava threw her hands in the air. “Well, that’s just perfect. How the hell was I supposed to ask *you* when you’d gone out of your way to make me think my ass was on the line?”

“Again, the Avaritia of old would have come to me regardless. She certainly would have asked at least Luxuria for advice.”

Her defenses abandoned her once more, leaving her feeling idle and foolish.

“Therefore,” Lucifer continued, “I believed you to be entirely indifferent, and decided to strip your powers and render you human. I would have left it at that were it not for Luxuria and Gula. Upon learning I had essentially disinherited you, they implored me to reconsider. At first, I admit, I was skeptical. I had little reason to believe you cared at all what became of your relationship with me, or those you have cultivated in the pit. I couldn’t even be sure if your interlude with your vampire was genuine or just another part of your rebelling.”

“I never rebelled!”

“And I’m sure you believed that. Regardless, I decided to give you tonight to prove yourself. If Dante was merely another distraction, then you wouldn’t have cared what happened to him. Your actions restored your powers.”

Ava nodded impatiently. “And what of Dante?”

“What about him?”

“I could rip your lungs out, you know that?”

“That would be rather difficult, as I don’t possess any.” Lucifer’s smile turned kind.

“Dante is quite all right ... or he will be once he awakens.”

Her heart jumped into her throat. “He’s...”

“Well, he’ll be fine after a little recuperation, I should say. That last blast from the collection box wasn’t exactly—”

She nodded. “It was different. The light—”

“Poor Mammon.” He shook his head. “He never saw it coming.”

“What did you do?”

“I prepared for Dante’s biology to become travel friendly.” That made absolutely no sense. She just stared. “Ava, you’re not going back to work. Your powers will remain yours, of course, but you’re officially fired. However, as your surrogate father, I do demand at least one visit a year, and I somehow doubt he’ll want to wait portal-side for your return.” Lucifer nodded to the vampire. “When he awakens, the boost I’ve given him will ensure that Hell can be as much his home as it will always be yours.”

A few long moments lapsed between them, during which Ava stood torn between hysterical giggles or hard, erratic sobs. It couldn’t be true. The delusions of a mind gone mad, perhaps, but as far from reality as possible. Had Mammon sucked her into his collection box? Was this what the inside looked like?

Lucifer held her gaze. He looked real. Her hands, her skin, her body felt real. The ground seemed real, as did the cool night air and the thick scent of burning demon. Dante felt real too. Unconscious as he was, he felt as real as anything else. “Oh shit,” she said.

Lucifer nodded. “Indeed.”

“I’m—”

“Yes.”

“And he’s—”

“Yes.”

“And you’re—”

“I’m going to say yes to everything, so you might as well get to the part where you hug me and tell me how wonderful I am.”

She would have laughed had she not cried.

It was the last command she’d ever follow.

## Chapter Fourteen

The inside of the collection box wasn't quite the nightmare he'd imagined.

Though his eyes remained fastidiously shut, Dante had been awake for a few minutes now. He lay naked on what appeared to be a bed with a warm, female body draped across his chest. His nostrils filled with her rich, familiar scent, and while his throat tightened with hope the rest of him refused to believe it. Ava was a million miles away. He remembered that. He remembered jumping into the light as the world trembled and fell away. He remembered where he was, or rather where he was supposed to be. He remembered everything, yet nothing could eradicate or duplicate her heat. Dante would know her anywhere.

*Not possible.*

Ava was with him, her possessive arm wrapped around his middle. She felt fantastic, hot and real. So wondrously real.

This didn't add up. It wasn't where he was supposed to awaken. A trick? A last cruel glimpse of the life he could have had? Shit, he didn't know. Perhaps the next two thousand years wouldn't be so tortuous if he kept his eyes closed. Maybe he could keep this illusion alive by pretending to sleep.

Her fingers danced across his belly, her warm breath tickling his skin. "Still not awake, are you?" Dante inhaled sharply, and she stilled. "Or *are* you?"

"You're not real," he whispered.

"I'm not, am I?"

"No. You're a dream. A fantastic dream. You can't be real."

She pressed a kiss against his chest, her lips forming a smile. "Why can't I be real?"

"Pretty sure it's not torture inside the box if I get you with me."

Ava drew a circle around his bellybutton with her index finger before venturing farther south. When her hand danced up the length of his cock, he couldn't help himself. He took in another deep breath, braced himself and opened his eyes.

She didn't disappear. Ava smiled, stretched gloriously naked and in his arms. Her hair hung loose around her face, her tawny gaze twinkling as though she knew the punch line of a terrific joke. Her pale, pristine skin was clean of bruises, and the worry lines to which he'd grown so accustomed over the last few days had faded completely. She looked happy and free, and her gaze was on him. "Oh fuck."

Ava grinned, squeezing his growing erection. "That's the idea."

"You're not a dream? Tell me you're not a dream."

"I'm not a dream."

"But you're here."

"Yes."

Dante blinked stupidly. "And I'm here."

"Yes."

"And we're not dead or in a box?"

She giggled. She fucking giggled. Ava never giggled. Dante stared at her in open amazement, and she gave him a look of pure adoration. Her sparkle softened, but didn't fade, her smile turning joyous. His insides singed with heat and his heart threatened to

pound. No one had ever looked at him like that—like he was worth fighting a thousand ships and burning the topless towers of Ilium. It was disarming but amazing all at once. He didn't know what to do or say. All he could do was stare in turn.

At last she spoke, her voice an answer to a prayer. "God, I love you."

"What?"

"I love you."

Now he knew. Dead or dreaming, one or the other. "Pinch me." Ava cocked an eyebrow and squeezed the head of his cock. Pleasure spiked his veins, but she didn't disappear. Neither did he. Dante grinned. "Not sure that counted, sweetheart."

She snickered and lowered her head to his chest. "Let's try this then, shall we?" She bit his nipples playfully, giggling again when he yelped. "You're awake. I'm here. And I love you."

"Why?"

Ava smirked. "Why?"

"Yes, erm, no. I mean ... what the fuck happened?" Dante sat up at last, taking in his surroundings. They had returned to the hotel room, apparently, which sat exactly as it had before they left to face Lucifer and the others. He spotted his clothes piled with hers on the floor, both sets caked in dirt. Yet his body didn't ache, nor did he see any glaring welts or any indication as to what had transpired. It didn't make sense. "You love me," Dante echoed. It was the only thing he could grasp.

"I do."

"I guess things got better after I passed out. We won, didn't we? This feels like we won."

Her grin didn't waver. "We won."

"Tell me what happened."

And she did. Over the next twenty minutes, Ava told him everything, sparing no details. He listened and nodded, smiled, gasped and laughed in all the right places, and though he processed every word she spoke, his mind kept returning to the three most important.

The three that changed everything. *She loved him.* "Tell me again," he whispered once she finished.

"The whole thing?"

"Well, yes. The whole thing. I'll wanna hear it again. Not now, though. Next time, can you do it like Orson Wells?"

She stared at him. "What?"

"The guy can narrate. Hey, do you *know* Orson Wells?" Ava made a face and smacked him. "Just saying," Dante continued, "seems like the kinda guy who'd go to hell."

"Not the point!"

"Then tell me the point."

"There were many points!"

He conceded that. "Top three then," he said. "Tell me the top three points."

"And then what?"

"Not sure. Something to do with you, me, this bed and no obligations. We'll break for eats, of course, but I wanna lick you all over first."

Ava grinned. "Can't we get to that part now?"



“In a minute. Top three points, please.”

“You’re a nuisance.”

Dante smirked. “Yeah, but you love me.”

“I really do.”

“And I really love you back.”

Ava beamed. “I take it that was one of the three points?”

“Yeah, but you’re gonna have to repeat it. So start reciting, so we can start sinning.”

He shot her a goofy smile at his pun, his insides lighting when she snorted and smacked his chest. “Seriously, sweetheart, we’re not on anyone’s timetable. I got all night.”

“Jackass.”

“Watch it, or someone *won’t* get a spanking.”

Ava rolled her eyes and huffed good-naturedly. “Fine,” she said, holding up a hand and beginning the count-off. “I’m not a Sin anymore, but I retain my powers.”

“That’s one,” Dante said.

“You’re like super-vamp or something. You can go with me whenever I drop by the pit to visit the fam.”

He nodded. “That’s two.” The next few days would undoubtedly warrant numerous retellings, as the whole of what she’d conveyed seemed too good to be anything but a dream. The only part he cared about, however, the only part that mattered, were the words he’d never tire of hearing.

“And I love you.”

A low, possessive growl rumbled through his throat, his chest tightening and the rest of him flying high as a paper kite. Dante pulled her close and covered her mouth with his, a thousand different sensations firing through his body. He couldn’t name half, he could barely name five, but he knew elation and awe held the leading roles. How he’d come to this, he’d never know. Chance and fortune, perhaps, he wouldn’t question it. Instead, he mused on how sweet she tasted as he helped her onto his lap, and his fingers dipped between her legs to explore her liquid heat. It wasn’t until she arched to draw his cock inside her body that he recognized, once and for all, this was no dream.

His imagination was good, but nothing compared to this. “Take me home,” he murmured.

And she did. Over and over.

After all, Ava had always been the only he’d ever known.

## Epilogue

He chose a corner table today. No rhyme or reason, except he wanted to be prepared when his companion arrived. He knew quite well how much Jev liked having the upper hand, be it picking the café, choosing the town, or even childish victories like being the first to spot the other. Lucifer had long since resigned himself to the fact eternity with his former best friend would be a matter of mind games, or whatever tickled Jev's whimsy.

It was not coincidence the waves of communication had been breached for the first time in nearly a thousand years. When Pixley had first notified him of the invitation, he'd been more than tempted to decline without so much as a "how do you do," but curiosity, as always, bettered his judgment. Though the recent change in staff most definitely fed into Jev's interest, the opportunity to visit with his old friend proved too damn tempting. Lucifer hated being predictable, but there remained things that would never change. Lucifer's fascination with the man ranked among the top ten.

Chances were he'd leave frustrated and angry. That was all right. At least he was prepared.

Lucifer smiled at the waitress—Maggie Moon, according to her name tag—when she arrived with his coffee. Black as night. He loved stereotypes. A small, secretive grin tickled his lips, his gaze falling to the chessboard he'd laid out across the table. It was a favorite game of Jev's.

No one could accuse the Almighty of tardiness, though many had tried. A stylish three minutes passed before the deity walked through the door. He looked the same as ever, today sporting a pair of cargo shorts and a loose-fitting shirt with a soft but noticeable Hawaiian print. Lucifer, of course, hadn't visited with him during any of the more recent fashion trends, but somehow he'd known exactly what sort of statement to expect. Jev's eyes widened eagerly upon seeing Lucifer, his features remained sharp and sculpted, a mop of dusty-blond hair atop his head. If he had changed at all, the differences lay so subtle not even the King of Hell could detect them.

"Luc," Jev said warmly, pulling out his seat. "I see you got my message."

"Yes." Lucifer waved at Maggie Moon for another coffee. "How shall we start?"

"You take white," he replied, nodding at the chessboard.

"Same as always."

Big J smiled knowingly before turning a wink to Maggie Moon who had promptly arrived with a warm mug in hand. "Thank you, dear. Three sugars and two creamers, please."

The waitress favored him with a flirty grin. "You sure do have a sweet tooth, don'cha, darlin'?"

Lucifer smirked. "You have no idea."

"Don't get me in trouble now," the other man warned.

The devil thought it best to hold his tongue until they were alone. The second Maggie Moon disappeared, he leaned inward and muttered, "Better watch yourself. Wouldn't want another virgin birth on your hands."

"My dear man, that lady is no virgin. Furthermore, I'm not here to bring about the second coming. I'd also have a bit more taste than a coffeehouse waitress."

“You say that now. Old habits die hard.”

“Be careful. You’re bordering on blasphemous.”

Lucifer merely shrugged and sipped his coffee. “My apologies,” he said, fingers slipping over one of his chess pieces. “It’s been a rather trying week.”

Jev nodded, hunching over the board conspiratorially. “So I’ve heard,” he said without looking up. “Word is you’re in the middle of a staff change. One of your Sins resigned.”

It should have been surprising, but it wasn’t. Though Avaritia’s angel had sworn sideways the secret had remained a secret, Lucifer knew the fool had no allegiance to any god but his own. And while he did experience an expected rush of disappointment at having lost such a well-kept secret, he merely pulled his lips into a tight smile and nodded. “You heard right.”

Jev smirked, sliding one of his pawns forward. “I know that look.”

“What look?”

“You honestly thought I didn’t know, didn’t you?”

Lucifer decided to engage one of his knights, though truthfully, what little attention he’d given the game had evaporated. “I have no way of knowing what you do or do not think, as I’m sure you remember. You didn’t give me that particular power.”

“Well,” Jev responded, putting a bishop into play. “I can’t grant powers I myself don’t entertain. At least among my staff.”

“Pity.”

“Do you think your girl’s recent liberation will inspire the others to seek lives outside your employ?” The game continued, but now neither seemed to be paying attention. Jev kept looking up, eyes glimmering in a way that would have made Lucifer nostalgic once upon a time. “What would happen,” he went on, “should the others quit? Sin itself wouldn’t die out, of course, but you might actually have to clock in some field work.”

“Somehow, I think I’d manage.” Lucifer moved the queen forward. “Is that what you wanted to talk about? My staffing arrangements?”

“No. Is it so hard to believe that I’ve missed our conversations?”

“You know what to do to fix that.”

Jev tsked. “Still an old softy, I see. Strange how that works. After all, you were the one so eager to point out the flaws of my creation—”

“That was a different time.”

“Clearly.” Jev slid the black king across the board. “Listen, I’m willing to make a wager.”

“A wager?”

“You know little Ava won’t be the only to break rank. Others will follow soon.”

Lucifer didn’t say anything at first. He was honestly surprised it had taken any of them as long as it had to seek freedom. An eternity of conducting the same job did grow tiresome, he should know. Still he was curious enough to know where this was going to venture a quiet, “Perhaps not. Avaritia was always a little different.”

“You don’t believe the others will follow in her footsteps?”

“I don’t presume to know.”

“Hence my wager.” Jev leaned forward. “Five souls says they do.”

“Five?”

“I’ll allow five into Limbo for rehabilitation if I’m proven right. Six months at the most, one of your remaining Sins will seek retirement.”

“Five whole souls.” Lucifer paused. “Interesting. And what happens if you’re proven wrong?”

“Then I’ll find something else to wager. You remember how this works.” Jev glanced to the chessboard and up again, a wide grin on his face. “Is that a checkmate?”

Lucifer didn’t even bother looking down. “No,” he said. “Not yet.”

## **The End**

### **About the Author:**

A lifelong enthusiast of larger-than-life characters, Rosalie Stanton’s muse is fueled by alpha males, from badass bikers to scruffy-looking Nerf herders, and the intelligent, strong and independent women who actually do the driving. She loves interweaving the lives of people who appear to be polar opposites, and delving beneath the surface to see how well one actually complements the other.

Rosalie lives in southwest Missouri with her husband and two dachshunds, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. At an early age, she discovered a talent for creating worlds into which she could escape. Over the years, her vivid imagination evolved into a love of words and storytelling. Rosalie graduated from Missouri State University with a degree in English. When her attention is not employed by writing, she enjoys spending time with close friends and family.

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